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**Canada**

**FROM CONSUMERISM AND STEREOTYPES TO PASTA SAUCE:  
A STUDY OF THE BARRIERS FACING STAY-AT-HOME FATHERS**

**By**

**Nina Bailey-Dick  
BA General Arts, University of Waterloo, 2000**

**THESIS  
Submitted to the Department of Psychology  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master of Arts degree  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
2002**

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*Dedicated to this person in my womb.*

*May joyous shared parenting enrich your growing years and  
by the time you're ready to consider being a mom or a dad,  
may shared parenting be commonplace.*

**ABSTRACT**

In the following thesis I describe and analyze the experiences of stay-at-home fathers by focussing on understanding, analyzing, and changing the barriers that discourage fathers from choosing the role of primary caregiver of their children. In this study, 19 stay-at-home fathers in Ontario (defined as fathers who are or have been the primary caregivers of their children for over 30 hours a week for at least a year) shared their experiences and perspectives regarding their roles as full-time parents through a written survey. Three of these fathers also shared their experiences through qualitative interviews. I found that full-time fathers face unique barriers to choosing the role of full-time parent because of their gender. Two significant barriers, the structural and value-laden barriers of consumerism and the devaluation of parenting, discourage all parents in our consumeristic and career-focussed society from prioritizing parenting over career success and/or the accumulation of material goods but particularly discourage fathers. Fathers face additional barriers to full-time parenting in a patriarchal society that still pressures men to prioritize success in highly esteemed paid work while devaluing "traditional" women's work of parenting and housekeeping.

This is the first known study of stay-at-home fathers in Canada and despite the small sample size it contributes to the fields of community psychology, family studies, sociology, and gender studies by increasing awareness and understanding of this marginalized and often-overlooked population. The study's qualitative methods and structural analysis of social values exemplify community psychology's commitment to integrating values and research in an effort to undertake social action

and effect positive social change. My intention is to motivate social action by prompting discussion and analysis of values society places on parenting and consumerism.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Can one gestate a thesis? Working on this thesis has been so intertwined with thinking about and gestating this child in my womb that the two seem inseparable. I'd like to thank this child growing inside of me for providing incredible motivation to fast-track this thesis in order to get it done before birth time. Thank you, child, for waiting to enter the outside world until I got this thesis done.

I am grateful for the 19 fathers who took the time to share of themselves. It seems unfair that I am the one getting a degree when I couldn't begin to form a meaningful research project without their generosity in giving their time as well as their openness and candor. These fathers give me hope for the future of our society and the possibility of egalitarian relationships between women and men. Thank you for that hope.

I've often felt blessed as I sat here in my office working on this thesis. Blessed to be in this Community Psychology program where I am provided with computer, office, printer, library, job opportunities, and mentors. Blessed with a flexible schedule that allowed me time for naps under my desk and visits to my family in Indiana. Blessed with the comraderie of my classmates as we wade our way through these two years and keep each other going. I'll miss this environment and I'll miss the everydayness of my friendships with my classmates.

I want to thank my advisor Angela Febbraro for her always kind and affirming spirit as she walked with me through this thesis process. I thank my committee members Richard Walsh Bowers, Geoff Nelson, and Angela for the hours

they've put into guiding and improving this thesis. I've enjoyed working on this with you all.

A big thanks to the ever-faithful librarians who ordered me countless articles and books at my request. It was pretty incredible to receive a little beat-up paperback book on stay-at-home dads from Australia (no charge!). And a special thanks to Rita Sharkey who was always there to answer trivial questions and help me find my way through the maze of academic red tape. I also want to thank Paul Davock for always having the time to listen and for lending his advice and wisdom to our thesis group's floundering. And my housemates, thank you for all the hearty and healthy suppers which I missed because I was working in my office but the leftovers sustained me through many long days and evenings at school.

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Thank you to my family for showing me the importance of valuing and honoring children and the caring of children above almost everything else. Your deep wells sustaining your generosity of spirit and time and energy as mothers and fathers are something I hope to find in myself as a parent.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Do you know anyone who is a stay-at-home dad? I asked this question many times this past summer and fall in my search for full-time fathers who would participate in my study by sharing their experiences of the barriers and encouragements facing stay-at-home dads. Had I been looking for stay-at-home moms, my search would have been much easier. Why do so few fathers choose to parent full-time? This question helped shape the study I undertook for my masters thesis requirement in community psychology. This thesis is a descriptive report of my findings as well as an analytical discussion of the broader social values that encourage or discourage fathers from becoming primary caregivers. It also offers proposals for social change in order to make full-time parenting more of a viable option for more fathers.

Through responses from 19 Ontario stay-at-home dads (SAHDs) (i.e., dads who are or have been the primary caregivers of their children for over 30 hours a week for at least a year) to a qualitative and mostly open-ended questionnaire, as well as interviews with 3 of these full-time fathers, this thesis allows us a glimpse into the lives of a little known population as they share experiences of being primary caregivers and their perspectives on issues surrounding the subject of fathers as full-time parents. They also share people's responses to their role, what they like the most and least about their role, where they find support to continue in their role, why they chose their role, what the government can do to support SAHDs, and why it is difficult for fathers to choose the role of primary caregiver. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of these fathers enables us to see society from a different perspective and to determine why so few fathers choose this role as well as to see what we need to change in order to allow more fathers the choice of being a full-time caregiver.



This thesis enables us to better understand some of the people who are a part of this marginalized and often invisible population. In the thesis I also name and discuss the societal values (or lack of values) that actively discourage not only fathers from being primary caregivers but also parents in general. In order to take the next step of social change, it is essential to understand the values that act as structural barriers and discourage parents, especially fathers, from prioritizing parenting. I seek to understand the realities and perspectives of SAHDs in order to make suggestions for how to change society, including institutions, values, attitudes, programs, and gender roles, so that parents can more freely choose whether one of them will be a full-time parent. If parents can freely choose whether that full-time parent will be the father or mother, I believe that it will help bring about gender equality by relieving the disproportionate weight of parenting responsibility currently resting on mothers' shoulders.

Through this research I discovered that gender-specific barriers (such as stereotypes about men's incompetence concerning domestic skills) do make a SAHD's role difficult at times, but one of the most significant barriers can be traced back to the basic structural barrier of society's devaluation of traditional feminine qualities and roles, specifically parenting. This devaluing of parenting is directly connected to another value-laden structural barrier: society's prioritizing, valuing and glorifying of consumerism. Together, this lack of value for the work of parenting and the overvaluing of consumerism create powerful social and financial pressures that push parents, and especially fathers, into prioritizing career success and material accumulation rather than prioritizing parenting.

I divide the findings and discussion of this study into the four areas of praxis as described by Prilleltensky (2001): philosophical, context, needs, and pragmatic. First I

present the Philosophical section where I look at what should be or could be if we dare to imagine a society supportive of SAHDs and parents in general. Then in the Context section I describe what presently exists through a literature review, explanation of methodology, description of the questionnaire and interview findings, and a discussion of these findings. The third section, entitled Needs, looks at what is missing and the existing problems. Pragmatic, the final section, focuses on what we can change in order to move society closer to our philosophical vision of a healthy society supportive of fathers and parents in general.

### ***Why I Chose This Topic***

Why did I choose to do a research project on stay-at-home dads if I am not a dad? I wanted a research topic that would hold my interest and passion through the significant changes of my pregnancy now as I am writing. This thesis has gestated at just about the same rate as the gestation of my first child. My pregnancy has not only added motivation and urgency to my research project, it has made my questioning and thinking about parenting and parental roles very real, salient, and intimate.

I think that families and society would benefit from more fathers taking on the role of primary caregiver. Promoting more equitable sharing of the care of children gives women more time and energy to succeed in and contribute to the public world of work and politics. I believe fathers and mothers are equally capable of caring for children and that children benefit from two involved caregiving parents rather than one. At the same time, I do not think that all families should establish the father as the primary caregiver nor that all children need two parents in their lives. What I am arguing for and what I am hoping for is that this study will promote a wider range of choices in parenting arrangements. Currently this ability to choose is hampered by negative attitudes toward caregiving fathers,

unsupportive governments and workplace policies, society's valuing of money and status over children and relationships, cultural assumptions about the primacy of motherhood, and the lack of community supports for stay-at-home dads.

My identity as a woman and a feminist also influenced me in choosing this topic and it colours my research work. I agree with the liberal feminist belief in sameness and equality, which in this situation means that men can parent as well as women (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). As I prepare myself for becoming a parent and as I view the parenting partnerships around me I am dismayed at how the roles of mother and father still seem so predictable and prescribed. Fathers today may be "more involved" but it is usually the mother who is the organizer and coordinator of family life and it is usually she who makes the most sacrifices to take care of young children (Gerson, 1993). As Eichler (1997) writes, "women have adopted most of the roles previously occupied by men but men have not taken over half of the tasks previously done by women" (p. 60). Frankly, this imbalance of familial responsibilities scares me. I do not want to give up all of my work and interests and public-world aspirations for our children while my husband continues to pursue his aspirations with little disruption. This dismay I feel at the parenting patterns I see around me motivated me to research this topic.

My feminist beliefs also motivate me to research fatherhood in hopes that by better understanding the contrived narrowness of our societal expectations of fatherhood, we can critique and change those expectations. I agree with the men who are liberal profeminists who argue that removing gender restrictions benefits both women and men (E. D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). I care about men's roles, and specifically parenting roles, because "men's roles in, and resistance to, the gender revolution profoundly affect not only their lives but

the social, economic, and political fates of women and children" (Gerson, 1993, p. xxi). I chose this topic, in part, because if we understand the reasons for men's choices it helps us to know how to promote social change by influencing those choices. Cultural feminism also informs this thesis insofar as it encourages us to value labour (parenting) that has traditionally been associated with women (Unger & Crawford, 1996). I hope that this research project will promote social change by raising awareness of different parenting models, normalizing the idea of fathers as full-time caregivers, encouraging present stay-at-home dads in their roles, and challenging everyone to think about the societal and structural barriers we live with which deter parents from being primary caregivers.

### ***My Biases***

Before proceeding any further I want you, the reader, to know a little more about who I, the researcher, am so that you know what influenced my direction of research. I believe, as do most feminists, that objectivity and value neutrality are impossible (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). I make no claims that I carried out this research in an objective way. My biases influenced every step of decision-making and inquiry, and they influence how I am now writing this report on my thesis. In fact, if I am aware of and open about my biases, I believe that these biases add depth and quality to the research process. My experiences of the research process and the impact that the process has had on me (as with all qualitative researchers) are part of the research itself (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995) and so I include my reflections throughout the thesis. I name and briefly explain the following biases below: my heterosexuality, my lack of parenting experience, my family history and values, my identity as a woman, feminist, white person, Christian, Mennonite, and my middle-class background and community.

My heterosexuality is one bias that influenced my decisions about the scope of research and continues to influence my analysis of the findings. I chose to limit the study to heterosexual fathers in committed relationships with women in an effort to hold constant the gender dynamics while I explored other issues of full-time fathering. The research scope reflects my personal interests in fathering and parenting issues in heterosexual partnerships because I chose and will soon parent within a heterosexual relationship. Not having experienced childraising also influences my research work in the fact that I am an outsider looking into the culture of parenting and trying to understand and analyze it without having experienced it first hand.

Inasmuch as this is family research and I am from a family and forming a new family I need to name my biases around my family beliefs and values. In my family of origin, my father was and is very involved in his parenting role. He had to work full-time my whole life, but I have grown up knowing that he wished he could have stayed home to raise his children. Knowing that my dad and other men sincerely mourn the fact that they could not or cannot be full-time caretakers for their children influences my research. Another way my family experience influences my research is that regardless of the inconclusive studies showing the advantages or disadvantages of young children having a parent as a full-time caregiver, I know through personal experience the emotional, intellectual, and practical *advantages* that having a stay-at-home mom and a very involved father gave me.

Something else that influences my research work is the fact that I am a white woman from a middle-class background living in a predominantly white community. I did not ask the ethnicity of the questionnaire respondents, so I do not know if fathers who are

people of colour were represented, but I do know that the three fathers I interviewed all happened to be white. I am speaking out of my experiences and observations in a predominantly white middle-class community. Other communities with higher percentages of people of colour may experience parenting and more specifically fathering quite differently. Also, my research leaves many families out of the picture in the fact that it looks at families able to survive on one income. Many families struggle to survive with both parents working full-time at low-paying jobs in order to survive.

A final bias I would like to share is my identity as a radical Christian and specifically a Mennonite. I am committed to following Jesus' example of working for social justice in all areas of life from personal eating habits to economic and political restructuring. I am not interested in merely helping people cope with an unhealthy system or destructive values; I believe that social justice means real social change. Though I never would claim to be successfully following Jesus' challenging example, it is something I struggle with and work toward. A strong Mennonite teaching and one that I try to follow is the importance of living simply with as little waste or hoarding of our limited resources as possible. This interest in and commitment to simple living as well as my broader commitment to social justice influences my thinking and discussion on this research topic, particularly in relation to the issue of consumerism.

It is my responsibility to share and analyze my role and biases and their impact on my research as well as my limitations and advantages from my own "ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status" (Ambert et al., 1995, p. 886). I have tried to do this in this section even though I realize that I hold biases of which I am not even aware. I have mentioned several ways that my biases influence my research work. My socioeconomic status as a

white middle-class woman has also influenced my research work, though I can never be sure in what ways. For example, were the fathers who participated in the study any less candid in their answers because I was a woman? Did my being a woman deter any fathers from joining in the study? Did my language style or terminology discourage certain fathers from joining the study? Even though I tried to make the language in the questionnaire accessible, one participant informed me that the language I used would have been intimidating for many rural fathers in his community.

### ***Frameworks of the Research and Thesis***

Fortunately, there is no reason to choose just one framework when analyzing a social issue, rather we can use multiple frameworks as lenses through which we view a topic and which give us multi-layered levels of perspective and analysis (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). I chose the structure of this research and thesis to reflect my emphasis on values and social justice and my commitment to positive structural social change. The idea for the structure of the paper came from an article by Isaac Prilleltensky (2001), entitled "Value-Based Praxis in Community Psychology," in which he proposes key considerations that community psychologists need to grapple with in order to move through the praxis cycle from reflection to research to action. He names four considerations: Philosophical, Contextual, Needs, and Pragmatic. (See Table 1.) Prilleltensky explains how we need a cycle that "begins with philosophical reflections on values, continues with research on needs and contextual factors, and ends with pragmatic considerations for action" (p. 761). We often overlook or ignore the philosophical and the pragmatic steps as it is easiest to focus on the present state and its problems. This focus often leads to an overemphasis on individual wellness rather than collective wellness. I agree with Prilleltensky's argument

that more resources need to be devoted to the philosophical (social justice) and pragmatic (social action) steps of the praxis cycle. Because I am committed to working for social justice, I am thankful for Prilleltensky's articulating and organizing of the steps needed in order to ensure that action comes out of research and reflection. I will explain each step of Prilleltensky's proposed value-based praxis in more detail at the beginning of each of the parallel sections of this paper: philosophical, contextual, needs, and pragmatic.

**Table 1.**

**Considerations for a Praxis Framework in Community Psychology**

Considerations	Key question	State of affairs explored	Analytical resource	Outcomes
Philosophical	What should be?	Ideal vision	Philosophical and political discourse about values and society	Vision of good life and good society
Contextual	What is?	Actual state	Survey of norms and of economic, social, and cultural trends	Identification of prevailing norms and social conditions
Needs	What is missing and what is desired?	Desirable state	Grounded theory and lived experience of community members	Identification of human needs
Pragmatic	What can be done?	Feasible change	Resource mobilization and social change theory	Social change strategies

Source: Prilleltensky (2001)

As a feminist, I view the topic of fathering through several feminist frameworks including the basic feminist belief that since the personal and private is political, we must restructure the private sphere if we want to restructure the public sphere (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). Socialist feminism argues that in order to restructure the system of childbearing and childraising and caring for the elderly and the sick, we need to also

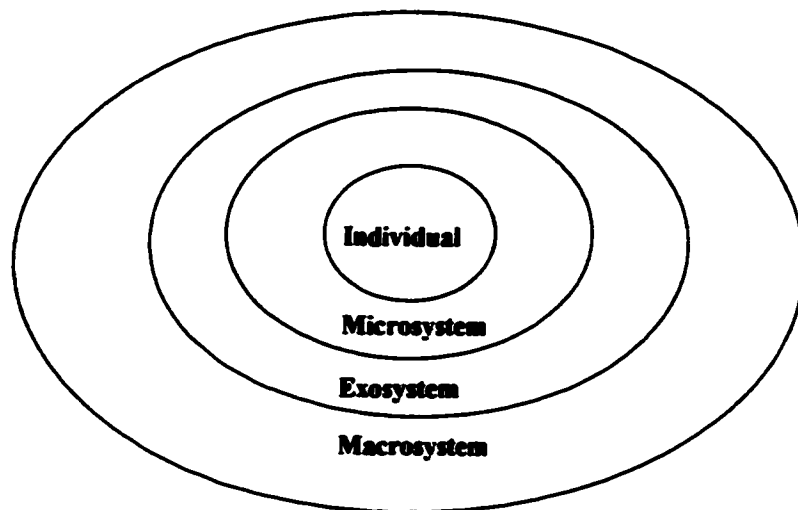


restructure the system of goods and services (the economy), the system of sexuality, and the system of gender socialization. This restructuring of the system of childraising is entirely possible since the gendered division of parenting roles is socially constructed (Rothenburg & Jaggar, 1978). As mentioned before, the liberal feminist belief in women and men's equal abilities to parent and the cultural feminist emphasis on valuing traditional women's work also influence my thinking on this subject.

I also work within an ecological framework as I think about and analyze the topic of stay-at-home dads. Community psychologists as well as others use the term "ecological perspective" or "ecological approach" to mean an analysis of not only the individual, or the family, but of all the contexts within which that individual or family live (M. Levine & Perkins, 1997). Often this ecological perspective is depicted as ever-widening rings of a circle with the individual in the centre and the macrosystem of cultural attitudes as the outside circle. (See Figure 1.) Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains the different levels in a variety of ways in his work on the ecology of human development over the years, but the basic concept is the idea of the individual being influenced by multi-layers of the environment around her or him. Community psychology embraces this idea of the individual needing to be understood within the wider environmental context and uses variations of this model in many contexts. For the purposes of this paper I have made a simple model illustrating the basic idea that the individual cannot be understood or analyzed without taking into consideration all of the areas of influence around her or him. The categories I am using to illustrate the ecological model in the context of this research are as follows: (a) the individual, in the context of this study, is the stay-at-home dad; (b) the microsystem includes spouses, family, and extended family; (c) the exosystem includes

the education system, medical system, economy, government, the workplace, professionals, spiritual/faith community, and the media; and (d) the macrosystem includes the wider societal attitudes toward fathering, parenting, work and money. The ecological perspective is important because by using it we recognize that though the influences of the broader environment may be more difficult to measure and analyze, the broader context profoundly affects the mental health and well-being of the individual and the community. Even though scientists agree that people and their development are influenced by their environment in principle, scientists, including psychologists and social scientists, have traditionally overemphasized the individual in practice (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

**Figure 1: Ecological Perspective**



### ***Style and Structure of Thesis***

The style and structure of this thesis are part of my research process; my writing of this "report" on my research is a part of the discovery process rather than merely a summing-it-up and a closing process (Richardson, 2000). Though this document is technically for my thesis committee and is written to meet the requirements of a master's

degree, I also write it for the fathers who participated in my study. As well, I write it for other stay-at-home dads, friends, family, and other parents who care deeply about the issues of fathering and parenting. I am torn between needing to write in an academic language in order to meet academic requirements and wanting to write so that this paper is accessible and actually interesting to whoever may pick it up out of curiosity. To balance these contradictory needs I will attempt to reject the "omniscient voice of science" (Richardson, 2000, p. 925) and use my personal and individual voice to make the thesis as accessible and interesting as possible. Fortunately, qualitative writers:

don't have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal, atemporal general knowledge; they can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it. (Richardson, 2000, p. 928)

So after all of this important preamble, let me begin to tell you what I have discovered in this research on full-time fathers and why I think it is significant.

## **SECTION 1: PHILOSOPHICAL - WHAT SHOULD BE?**

In this step of the praxis described by Prilleltensky (cycle of reflection, social research, and social action) I look at the philosophical considerations of stay-at-home dads (SAHDs) and ask the question, "What should be?" Prilleltensky emphasizes that "philosophical deliberations are important because they scrutinize the direction of our efforts; they make sure we are on course to reach a vision and that we do not work across purposes" (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 767). So what is my ideal vision of society in relation to the issue of SAHDs and parenting? Society should recognize the incredible value of parenting and provide status, affirmation, and support to parents. Parents should feel respected and supported. Parents should have enough time to savour parenting their children. We know that parents' involvement in work means less time with their children. Therefore the workworld is significant in light of parent-child activities and the way time influences child development and well being (Crouter & McHale, 1993). So I will take my ideal vision one step further and say that parents should have to work less so that they can more often be with their children. Parents should have the option of working part-time or only one parent working so that the parents can raise the children. In order to make this possible the government may need to financially support parents of young children so that they are not pressured to work out of financial necessity. Parenting should be equally shared by men and women.

Silvia Ann Hewlett (2001), an economist and author and chair of the National Parenting Association in the United States, created a parents' bill of rights which includes:

**Time for their children** (devise tax breaks for at-home parents; create part-time career ladders)

**Economic security** (guarantee a living wage for full-time workers; provide family allowances for families with children under six)

**A profamily electoral system** (make election days national holidays to encourage parents to vote)

**A supportive external environment** (extended school day and year to make it more compatible with parental work hours; increased funding for childhood education and childcare workers)

**Honor and dignity** (Index of Parent Well-Being; education credit granted to at-home parents; priority seating parking for parents with small children)

What else can we add to Hewlett's list? Her ideas of concrete actions help us imagine how this kind of vision might evolve. But we also need to envision aspects of an ideal society even if we do not know the steps needed to bring it about. For example, I believe that parents should be able to combine meaningful employment with childraising without feeling penalized for prioritizing parenting. The list of specific "shoulds" of an ideal vision or concrete actions (see Chapter 4) could be endless, but my underlying vision is of a society that values healthy relationships (including parenting) over profit or status.

## **SECTION 2: CONTEXTUAL - WHAT IS?**

In order to understand the perspectives and values of the SAHDs who participated in this study we must try to understand their context. Prilleltensky (2001) explains that the intention of this step of the praxis framework is to do a "survey of norms and of economic, social, and cultural trends" and to identify the "prevailing norms and social conditions" (p. 762). If we understand the context of the SAHDs, then we can begin to understand what influences their decisions and actions. In this chapter I include a literature review in order to understand the issues facing SAHDs and to learn from other researchers' studies in the area. In the literature review I look at the role of fathers in our society and the demands of work and family and then narrow my focus to scan the research on primary caregiver fathers. Though the research is limited, it does provide a beginning understanding of the barriers and encouragements SAHDs face in their role as a full-time parent. Then, to further understand the context of SAHDs, I include data I gathered from the 19 SAHDs who participated in my study by filling out a questionnaire and/or giving an interview. I end this chapter by discussing the findings and comparing them to two studies on SAHDs in the United States.

### ***Literature Review***

Why do so few men choose to stay at home to raise their children? In order to understand the context of this issue it is helpful to look at what scholars have been writing and researching in relation to this topic. Several scholars have studied this question, though the number of academic articles and books on fathers who are primary caregivers of their children is very limited (Russell, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000). This lack of academic research and discussion is due, in part, to the fairly recent appearance of stay-at-home dads, but it

may also be a result of society's attitudes toward those fathers who choose to stay at home. The following literature review includes a brief discussion of these attitudes as well as other barriers and encouragements to dads staying at home to raise their children. In order to understand why some dads choose to stay at home or not one must understand the environment within which stay-at-home dads live. Brief discussions of the history of the father role, recent changes in the role of fathers, the importance of fathers' involvement in parenting, a feminist perspective on fatherhood, and the tensions of work and family demands lay the groundwork for understanding the context and issues of primary caregiver fathers.

### **Changing Role of Fathers**

Though men's roles have not changed as dramatically as women's roles, men's roles have shifted since the 1970s when women's roles expanded beyond the domestic sphere into the public workplace (Akabas, 1984; J. A. Levine & Pittinsky, 1998). With the focus on women and mothers, researchers largely ignored fathers and fatherhood for many years (J. A. Levine & Pittinsky, 1998; Russell & Radojevic, 1992). Lack of study and critique of the father role has been a reflection of Western culture's narrow view of fatherhood (Russell & Radojevic, 1998). Following is a brief history of the change in the role of fathers and a summary of the current status and definition of fatherhood.

### **Brief History of the Father Role**

In Western societies it has only been since the industrial revolution that such a clear line has been drawn between the roles of father/breadwinner and mother/nurturer, yet today many people assume that these are the "natural" parental roles. In fact, our idea of

traditional parental roles (breadwinner/homemaker) is historically quite rare (Skolnick, 1997, p. 169). Though it is very difficult to summarize the role of fathers because fathers have always been a diverse lot and there is real danger in oversimplifying the history or roles of fathers, it is important to at least point out some common misconceptions (Lamb, 1998).

As the factory replaced the home as the place of production, the activities generating income and the activities of nurturing children were markedly separated (Chodorow, 1978; Glass, 2000). Historically, children have not been cared for exclusively by their biological mother but instead much care for children used to come from extended family and older siblings (Chodorow, 1978). Public schooling further separated fathers from their earlier role as teacher of their children (Silverstein, 1996). Parenthood evolved to mean motherhood and popular mythology emerged which saw women as “uniquely suited for child care because of their moral purity and special emotional sensitivity” (Silverstein, 1996, p. 16). Society expected men to fulfill their role of father through earning money for the family while women fulfilled their role of mother through nurturing and raising the children.

### **Fatherhood Today**

Current societal structures and systems still fail to encourage paternal participation in family life, and many actively hinder it (Lamb, 1983; Lamb, Russell, & Sagi, 1983; Pruett, 2000; Russell & Radojevic, 1992). A strong bias persists which assumes that women are meant to be primary caregivers of their family (Prilleltensky, Peirson, & Nelson, 2001), while “fathers are frequently assumed to be less interested and less competent” (Russell & Radojevic, 1992, p. 306). Men and fathers receive many mixed messages about how they



should behave and what role they should play, as is evident in a quote by Hayward, a men's rights advocate:

Men are told to be gentle, while gentle men are told they are wimps. Men are told to be vulnerable, but vulnerable [men] are told they are too needy. Men are told to be less performance oriented, but less successful men are rejected for lack of ambition. This list of contradictions is seemingly endless. (cited in E. D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999, p. 114)

The cultural assumption that paid work in the public sphere is masculine and family work in the private home is feminine continues to hinder a transformation of gender roles (Guterk, Nakamura, & Nieva, 1981). Further, people often overlook fathers' particular needs (J. A. Levine & Pittinsky, 1998). Despite this lack of structural change or societal support, many fathers' priorities are changing and they are becoming more involved in parenting (Gerson, 1993; S. B. Levine, 2000; Pruett, 2000; Russell & Radojevic, 1992). According to the (U.S.) National Center for Fathering Gallup Poll (1996), young fathers (18-25 years) are more committed to fathering now than they were a decade ago and they are more committed than older fathers. In 1986, 66% of men agreed that "when making important family decisions, consideration of the children should come first." When asked this same question in 1995, 81% agreed. In her recent book *Father Courage: What Happens When Men Put Family First*, Suzanne Braun Levine explains this shift in priorities as a commitment which "poses a challenge to the traditional separation of church (home) and state (paid work), the separation of the world of women and the world of men" (2000, p. xii). What may seem, at first glance, like a private and personal choice of a father to spend more time with his children is actually part of a much larger social change with far-reaching effects.

## **The Importance of Highly Involved Fathers**

Some of these far-reaching effects of increased father involvement in parenting are the benefits of fathers' involvement in family life. According to The National Fatherhood Initiative, a U.S. based organization that supports "loving, committed and responsible fathers," children with fathers who are engaged in their lives show "greater self-esteem, higher educational achievement, a more secure gender identity and greater success in life" (S. B. Levine, 2000, pp. xix). The National Center for Fathering, another U.S. based organization that supports fathering, summarizes some of the positive outcomes for children of involved fathers:

- More confident and less anxious about unfamiliar settings
- Better able to deal with frustration
- Better able to gain a sense of independence and an identity outside the mother relationship
- More likely to mature into compassionate adults
- More likely to have higher self-esteem and grade point averages
- More sociable.

(The National Center for Fathering Website, 1996)

Highly involved fathering is associated with not only more successful children, but greater marital satisfaction (Silverstein, 1996). Men more involved in family work usually means that a power shift happens in the household which creates wide-reaching changes. Scott Coltrane (1996) listed some of the changes that happen when fathers become more involved, including: mothers mental health improves, fathers become more sensitive, and children thrive and have fewer gender stereotypes. Despite society's over-emphasis on the mother-child relationship and the lack of research on and understanding of the father-child dyad (Radin & Russell, 1983; Silverstein, 1996), there is general agreement in the cited studies that fathers can nurture their children just as competently as mothers (Pruett, 2000;

Radin, 1982; Russell, 1983). There is also evidence that increased paternal participation can result in benefits for mothers, fathers, and children (Coltrane, 1996; Lamb, Russell, & Sagi, 1983).

### **Fatherhood is a Feminist Issue**

The effects of the activities, attitudes, and well-being of a father reach far beyond a particular nuclear family. As is evident from the benefits of highly involved fathers, fatherhood issues relate directly to mothers' work-loads, women's career choices, children's well-being, marital quality, strength of community networks, workplace policies, social policies, and economic structures. Even authors such as J. A. Levine and Pittinsky (1998) who do not explicitly identify themselves as feminist, see the attention on transforming fatherhood as something that should not strive to "minimize or obscure the needs of working mothers but, quite the opposite, to advance both interests" (p. 5). In her article entitled *Fathering is a Feminist Issue*, Louise Silverstein (1996) argues that the ideology of fatherhood contributes to "interlocking inequalities in both paid employment and family life" (p. 3). Therefore, transforming fatherhood to a nurturing role is a necessary step in creating an egalitarian environment where both women and men can thrive. According to Silverstein, it is only when men experience the acute work-family conflict that women have been experiencing for years that they will understand and support the structural changes needed to help balance the demands of work and family.

Silverstein considers the most significant barrier to women's equality in the workforce to be men's failure to take equal responsibility for the work at home. Do women and men equally share the work of home and children? Studies measuring how women and

men divide the domestic workload consistently show that women still do the majority of the work, especially after children enter the family (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997). In the early 1980s it was generally agreed that "fathers' participation is not high, that truly shared parenting is still rare" (Hoffman, 1983, p.167). More recent studies indicate that this is still largely true (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994). However, J. A. Levine and Pittinsky (1998) quote several studies to demonstrate that the number of hours men and women spend on housework and childwork are now very similar, but the authors go on to admit that women still feel like they are "doing it all," because they take more responsibility for planning and organizing activities; they invest more mental/emotional energy into the family.

### **Demands of Work and Family**

The women's movement has not only shifted women's roles dramatically by opening up the doors of the workplace to many women, it has also shifted men's roles and many common family patterns of childcare and housework (Akabas, 1984). This change is not necessarily problematic in itself; the problems arise when the workplace does not also change its patterns to accommodate the new needs of families. Many jobs in the capitalist market of North America demand employees who can give one-hundred percent to their work without the "distractions" of needing to cook, clean, give birth, nurture children, or sustain family and community relationships. In other words, many workplaces appear to demand an employee who is a man with a wife at home to take care of everything (Bailyn, 1993; Silverstein, 1996). Today fewer and fewer employees fit this profile. Glass (2000) concludes that there is a "fundamental incompatibility between succeeding in a capitalist labor market and raising reasonably well-adjusted children" (p. 129), and others agree (Freiler, Stairs, Kitchen, & Cerny, 2001, p. 65). Many authors document parents' extreme

stress in balancing the dual demands of work and family (Galinsky, Kim, & Bond, 2001; Higgins, Duxbury, & Lee, 1994; Ishii-Kuntz, 1994; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001; Weigel, Weigel, Berger, Cook, & DelCampo, 1995). Even if parents do not feel stressed by work, it influences parents' values and worldviews and, therefore, work influences their parenting choices and priorities (Crouter & McHale, 1993).

How does the issue of father-involvement relate to this work-family tension? Many people still expect fathers to prioritize their careers at the expense of their family life (S. B. Levine, 2000) and many fathers do prioritize their work over their children (Ritner, 1992). This does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in family life, as many fathers want to spend more time with their children but feel unable to because of work demands (Brayfield, 1995; Stockley & Daly, 1999). Fathers juggling work and family responsibilities often suffer from invisible "daddystress" (J. A. Levine & Pittinsky, 1998, pp. 28-29). This stress is referred to as invisible because men are often very hesitant to reveal their family concerns or needs in the workplace. Many workplace cultures view men who prioritize family as less committed to the job, less hard-working, and less masculine than other men.

Research has focussed on women and the work-family balance (Elman & Gilbert, 1984; D. L. Nelson, Quick, Hitt, & Moesel, 1990; Paulson, 1996), yet studies are needed to look at fathers' work schedules, family relationships, and work-family balance (Brayfield, 1995). Societal assumptions about gender roles contribute to this lack of research and understanding of fathers' experiences of work-family conflict when men are assumed not to be interested in or affected by their family life. In one study of work-family balance, men were not given part of the questionnaire, which was a "detailed child care study," because it "was assumed to refer to details most fathers would not remember" (Agassi, 1982, p. 12).

Ignoring or devaluing fathers' interest in and involvement with their children only reinforces gender stereotypes and further excludes men from active participation in parenting.

From her research in the United States, Glass (2000) concludes that the strain of the work-family tension is exacerbated by the rarely challenged assumption that "those who responsibly parent their children should expect diminished career success" (p. 134).

Parents can also expect to struggle financially: statistics reveal that households with children face "relative impoverishment [...] on both an average and per capita basis" (Glass, 2000, p. 134). The lack of affordable and high-quality childcare also adds to the financial pressures and difficulty of balancing work-family demands (Liazos, 1991).

### **Stay-at-Home Fathers**

One response to work-family tensions and the changing definition of fatherhood is some fathers choosing to stay home as primary caregivers of their children. The minimal academic interest in studying stay-at-home dads appears to have peaked in the 1980s and has since tapered off with no known Canadian studies on the subject (Russell, 1999).

Though the reports vary, the number of dads staying at home to raise young children has slowly increased over the past three decades and, according to one researcher, "primary caregiver fathers can no longer be written off as eccentric – they have become an integral part of the middle-class social reality" (Geiger, 1996, p. 100). After summarizing the 10 known studies of stay-at-home dads (in Australia, Sweden, the United States, and Israel), I discuss the demographics and some of the issues of stay-at-home dads.

## **Studies on Stay-at-home Fathers**

### **Australia**

In the early 1980s, Graeme Russell of Macquarie University began a longitudinal study of shared-caregiving families (including families with SAHDs) near Sydney, Australia. Interviewing and observing 309 families, Russell (1982) compared shared-caregiving families to traditional families. Russell's goal was to compare the lifestyles of the two different family types in order to understand why some shared caregiving and others did not and to determine the consequences of shared-caregiving on family relationships (Radin, 1994). In her overview and critique of several studies Norma Radin states that Russell concluded that families share caregiving as a result of various circumstances including "(1) the inability of the father to gain employment; (2) the parents' needing or wanting the extra income from having both parents work; (3) the desire of the mother to pursue a career; and (4) beliefs that both parents should be involved in child care" (Radin, 1994, p. 25). The majority (93%) of the families Russell studied felt that the most important benefit of a highly involved father is the improved child-father relationship (Radin, 1994).

Another study from Australia was carried out by Carolyn Grbich (1987). She recruited 25 primary caregiver fathers from the Melbourne area in order to investigate why they decided to parent in this manner, what the fathers do and experience in their roles, and the reactions of other people to these fathers. She concluded that most fathers choose the role of primary caregiver for reasons other than economic necessity and that most of them are committed to it for the long term. She also observed that the choice of a father as a

primary caregiver has spread across the social classes and that negative societal responses to fathers in this role have lessened through the years.

### Sweden

Family-supportive policies and commitment to gender equality in Sweden make it a unique setting for studying primary-caregiving fathers. Michael Lamb, Ann Frodi, Carl-Philip Hwang, and Majt Frodi studied 52 families who were expecting their first child (Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi, 1982). They hoped that by interviewing families before and after the birth of their first child they could better understand why some fathers took advantage of Sweden's generous parental leave policy and others did not. One of the things they were interested in was whether the attitudes of the non-traditional couples (non-traditional in the sense that they did not follow the traditional gender roles of parenting) were different from the traditional couples and if these attitudes were stable. They found that fathers-to-be in non-traditional families valued their family more than their work. Despite the good intentions of fathers-to-be and their desire to prioritize family over work, by the time the infants in the study were 16 months old all of the primary caregivers were mothers (Radin, 1994).

### United States

Six studies have been conducted and reported in the United States (plus one more study by Cobb, 2002, in progress). Norma Radin (1982) of the University of Michigan began a longitudinal study of 59 middle-class families with children 3-6 years old living near Ann Arbor, Michigan. Radin conducted interviews, observed tasks, and administered various surveys in 1978, and then follow-up studies were conducted 4 and 11 years later. The author notes that at this time researchers really did not know what consequences would



result from fathers as primary caregivers, as this was a very new field of study. Radin focussed her research on the stability of the father as the primary caregiver arrangement and on long-term consequences for the children of these families (Radin, 1994). She concluded that the children of these families "appear to flourish" and recommended that other families not hesitate to consider this pattern of parenting (Radin, 1982).

In the 1980s, Kyle Pruett (Radin, 1994) from the Child Study Center of Yale University studied stay-at-home dads caring for infants near New Haven, Connecticut. Participating in the 8-year study were 17 families with the father as the primary caretaker. Using interviews, observation, and an examination of the babies in a laboratory, Pruett researched the development of the child, attachment to the parents, and the parents' relationship with each other. Pruett concluded that the children all turned out healthy and that fathers do a competent job of parenting (Radin, 1994).

In the 1990s Brenda Geiger (1996) studied 28 families in New York State. Using a video camera to record infant behaviour and parent-infant interaction as well as interviews, Geiger investigated child-care arrangements, who did household chores, and who played with the child while analyzing affiliative and attachment behaviours. Her conclusions were that primary caregiving fathers were "competent caregivers, exciting play partners, and nurturant and affectionate companions" (p. 105). She recommended that these "new competencies ought to be recognized and strengthened in all fathers" (p. 105).

In 1998 and 1999, Toni Schindler Zimmerman (2000) conducted two similar studies, one on stay-at-home mothers and one on stay-at-home fathers. Though the studies were small (total of 50 participants), Zimmerman noted interesting similarities and differences between the two groups of parents. Focussing on marital equality and

satisfaction, she named four significant themes. Zimmerman (2000) reports that: mothers in both groups report higher stress and exhaustion than the fathers, couples in both groups indicate that they are highly satisfied with their marriages, stay-at-home dads are less likely to be involved in their community, and full-time parents receive minimal societal validation for their role.

In his ongoing research, Dr. Robert Frank focuses on comparing families with traditional parent roles to families with non-traditional roles, so his studies often include data on and discussion of stay-at-home fathers. His interests lie in the child-parent bonding, attachment, and child-parent interaction of these families (Frank, 1995). He has found that stay-at-home dads experience a stronger bond with their children than traditional dads and that the mother and father both strongly influence the child when the father is a SAHD (Frank, 1998).

### Israel

Abraham Sagi (1982) conducted a study very similar to Radin's in Haifa, Israel. Participating in the study were 60 families, some traditional and some with fathers as primary caregivers. With a similar focus on child development and attachment to parents, Sagi concluded that "fathers also possess significant potential [to be an effective parent], which can be materialized if the necessary environmental conditions are established" (p. 228).

### **Focus of Research on Stay-at-Home Fathers**

Many of the earlier studies of stay-at-home dads focus on areas of child development and parent-infant attachment with the researchers investigating whether fathers are competent caregivers (Geiger, 1996; Radin, 1982; Sagi, 1982, Zimmerman,

2000). The focus of these studies was useful in showing traditional thinkers that fathers could parent just as well as mothers. However, I am most interested in studies looking at the environment of stay-at-home dads that include barriers and encouragements to fathers choosing to be primary caregivers (Grbich, 1987; Lamb, et al., 1982; Russell, 1983). The following discussion will focus on parts of the above mentioned studies that research the environment of stay-at-home dads and that relate to my own plan of research. But first, I look at definitions and statistics on stay-at-home dads.

### **Statistics on Stay-at-Home Fathers**

Different studies define what a stay-at-home dad is in very different ways. Some researchers' definitions are vague and leave the definition up to the father (Radin, 1982). In his study Pruett merely required that the "father bore the major responsibility for parenting" (Radin, 1982, p. 15). Others were quite broad; for example, Lamb et al. (1982) defined a father who spent a month or more at home with his baby as a primary caregiver. Russell (1983) categorized a father as a primary caregiver if he spent over 15 hours a week at home alone with his children. Grbich (1987) defined primary caregiving fathers as fathers who had sole responsibility for the children for a minimum of 25 hours a week and planned to continue the arrangement for two years or more (1987, p. 18). Zimmerman's (2000) criteria for a SAHD was that he be home full-time while his wife worked full-time out of the home as the primary income provider. The strictest definition of a stay-at-home dad comes from Katherine Marshall (1998) in her article for Statistics Canada, in which she defines stay-at-home dads as fathers who are at home full-time, are not looking for employment, and are attending school. Researchers also use a wide variety of titles for the fathers they study. Some of the terms used are "stay-at-home dads," "stay-at-home

fathers,” “Hemmamen” (Harper, 1980), “primary caregiver fathers,” “full-time fathers,” and “househusbands.” Though certain terms may conjure up very different images of these fathers, they all refer to basically the same thing: a heterosexual father who invests a significant amount of time and energy in childraising and housekeeping, while his wife/spouse works for pay outside of the home.

### **How Many Fathers are Primary Caregivers?**

How many fathers in Western societies are the primary caregivers of their children while the mother works? Because the definition of a stay-at-home dad varies considerably, the number of stay-at-home dads also varies. According to Statistics Canada, which employs the strictest definition of stay-at-home dads, 6% of Canadian families in 1997 had a stay-at-home dad, compared to only 1% in 1976 (Marshall, 1998). Marshall clarifies that of the 6% of “stay-at-home dads” in 1997, an estimated 6% of them are actually discouraged workers (1998, p. 11). In other words, 6% of the so called “stay-at-home dads” are fathers who have not chosen the role and are not necessarily actively involved in parenting. Grbich (1992) concluded that the number of stay-at-home dads in Australia was 5% in 1986 by calculating the number of two-parent families with children under four years where the father was not in the work force and the mother was. Zimmerman (2000) reports that in the United States stay-at-home dads made up 1%-2% of the population in 1996 (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 337). A journalist quotes the U.S. Census Bureau as reporting that about 2 million stay-at-home dads exist in the United States and that the number has held steady since 1977 (Cummins, 2000). Another journalist reports the lower number of 1.5 million from the same census year (Schwartz, 2000). In the Swedish context, information on stay-at-home dads was not available, but a 1994 study showed that 50% of Swedish

fathers took a parental leave yet mothers still took 91% of the days available through parental leave (Haas & Hwang, 1995).

### **Why They Do It**

In several of the cited studies the researchers asked stay-at-home dads why they chose to be the primary caregivers of their children. It is important to understand why these fathers made this choice in the face of discouragement and even opposition to their parenting arrangement, because "only by understanding why some men support equality [in the sharing of childcare and other household responsibilities] and others do not can we locate the obstacles to progressive social change" (Gerson, 1993, p. 13).

In some cases, where women earned higher incomes or child-care was seen as too expensive, many fathers said that finances influenced their choice to stay at home (Russell, 1982; Zimmerman, 2000). The spouses' career desires often determine who considers staying home to nurture a baby. If the wife wants to work and the husband is less committed to his work or career, then the father may choose to stay home (Grbich, 1987; Radin, 1982; Russell, 1982). Other fathers choose to stay at home because they feel that they have the personality better suited to child-raising (Schwartz, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000). Many parents choose the arrangement of a stay-at-home dad because they believe in the benefit of parental care over non-parental childcare (Geiger, 1996; Zimmerman, 2000). Part of the reason to have a father as a primary caregiver is the desire to develop a strong father-child bond (Geiger, 1996; Glass, 2000).

According to studies (e.g., Pleck, 1997), there is no easy answer as to why a father chooses to stay at home to raise his children. Usually the reasons are multiple and why a

family may begin with the father as the primary caregiver may not be the same reason that they continue with the arrangement (Russell, 1982).

## **Barriers**

Since fathers in Western societies have been shown to be competent primary caregivers, why are stay-at-home dads still so rare? “Despite the rhetoric of politicians, policy makers, and community leaders, American society continues to demonstrate low regard for children and child care providers” - including fathers who are primary caregivers for their children (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 349). Lamb (1983) blames attitudes and assumptions in popular culture, legislation, and administrative and judicial areas for hindering fathers’ equal participation in childcare. As mentioned earlier, childcare is often viewed as inappropriate for men and as an unmasculine activity (Baruch & Barnett, 1981; Harper, 2000). Interviews of stay-at-home dads document some of the negative comments stay-at-home dads receive such as “The guys where I used to work (drafting) used to say ‘Yuk-nappies’ and ‘Oh it’s great, you go to playgroup with all those women, it must be tremendous!’ (Grbich, 1992, p. 84).

Societal attitudes overvaluing formal paid work and undervaluing house and child work are also barriers to fathers choosing to stay at home (Cummins, 2000, Zimmerman, 2000). Men are unlikely to change their role in the family unless there are visible and societally-valued benefits (Lamb, 1983). Many men do not realize that the rewards for highly involved fathers are many, such as increased “curiosity, imagination, playfulness...the willingness to make mistakes, a sense of wonder, enthusiasm, flexibility, [and] humor” (S. B. Levine, 2000, p. xx). The gender stereotypes make it difficult for men to choose this pattern of parenting (Zimmerman, 2000); they also make it difficult for

fathers who do stay at home to retain a high sense of self-confidence (Cummins, 2000; Grbich, 1992; Schwarz, 2000). The Swedish study shows that employers' traditional stereotypes of men's roles are such a powerful barrier that they can overshadow policies that might officially encourage father participation in parenting and, in the end, actually deter fathers from taking a parental leave (Geiger, 1996; Haas & Hwang, 1995). Other manifestations of these negative attitudes are the double standards that affirm mothers for staying at home with a child but disapprove of a father who stays home with a child if it means a threat to the financial stability of the family (Riggs, 1997) and the fear that increasing father involvement in child care will mean increased incidences of child abuse (Russell, 1982).

If a father makes the decision to stay home he then faces the problem of a loss of income (Lovy, 1998) as well as social isolation that can make it difficult to sustain the parenting arrangement (Cummins, 2000; Grbich, 1992; Lovy, 1998; Schwartz, 2000). While spending many hours a day at home with young children is isolating for stay-at-home moms, many stay-at-home dads experience additional isolation by feeling unwelcome in play groups or neighbourhood networks largely composed of mothers and children (Grbich, 1992; Zimmerman, 2000).

### **Encouragements**

Though some people respond negatively to a stay-at-home dad (especially male peers), many people provide important encouragement by affirming the father's choice (Grbich, 1992; Russell, 1983). Support groups are another important way of receiving encouragement in their "unusual" role (Russell, 1983). Annual At-Home Dads Conventions held in the United States provide a way for fathers to meet each other and

discuss issues related to being primary caregiving fathers, including how to support fathers who “come out of the pantry” and make their caregiving role publicly known (Anderson, 1998, p. 1). The internet provides a way for men to support each other and even provides several web sites geared for stay-at-home dads as well as a journal for full-time fathers (Lovy, 1998). Further, knowing that they are fostering happy and healthy children is an encouragement to many stay-at-home dads (Geiger, 1996).

### **How to Support Fathers as Primary Caregivers: Suggestions for Changes**

#### **Social Policies**

Governmental social policies can be a powerful way to effect social change. These policies guide the “societal activities concerned with the distribution of goods and services by other than market criteria and directed at assuring individuals a minimum standard of living and a decent quality of life” (Kamerman, 1983, p. 24). The current problem is that the people who create and implement the policies often do not have a deep understanding of and personal experience with primary caregiving, because primary caregivers find it difficult to ascend to high levels in their careers (Glass, 2000; Kamerman, 1983).

The most important and consequential decisions for all of us collectively get made predominantly by people who have never worried about the pesticides on the food their children eat, have never gotten up five times in the night to nurse a child with an ear infection and then dragged themselves into work the next day, have never worried about whether their day care provider was attending to their child's needs, nor have made the agonizing decision of whether to leave a child home alone in an emergency or call in sick and risk their jobs. (Glass, 2000, p. 134)

An analysis of policy debates in the United States in the 1980s concludes that decision-makers are still committed to the traditional parenting pattern of the mother at home while



the father goes to work. These traditional gender-role assumptions have limited the scope and effectiveness of the federal child care legislation adopted in the U.S. in the 1990's (Teghtsoonian, 1997). Despite the frustration with policy makers and discouragement with the level of support for families struggling to balance work and family needs in Canada and the United States, many authors name governmental involvement through policy change as an important step to encourage increased paternal participation, including fathers as primary caregivers (Gatson, 1997; Glass, 2000; Hyde, Essex, & Horton, 1993; Lambert, 1993; Moss, 1990; Russell & Radojevic, 1992).

Those advising changes to social policy give many examples of policies that would help balance work-family conflicts and encourage increased paternal participation. Some of the suggested changes to government and workplace policies include the following: an extension of the child care tax credit to at-home parents (Glass, 2000); the implementation or expansion of paid parental leave (Harper, 1980; Russell, 1983); more flexible work schedules with part-time and job sharing options (Harper, 1980; Russell, 1983); publicly funded and regulated child care (Glass, 2000; Moss, 1990; Russell, 1983); parental sick leave and family leave (Glass, 2000; Moss, 1990); the promotion of shared living arrangements to increase the ratio of adults to children in a household (Glass, 2000; Harper, 1980); the requirement of family impact statements for proposed legislation (much like an environment impact statement but meant to protect and promote the well-being of families) (Glass, 2000); the reduction of work hours to a 30-hour week (Glass, 2000); the option of "averaging income earned in less needful stages of the family life-cycle to cover the period when children are young" and families are most in need of financial assistance (Harper, 1980, p. 232); and the protection of male reproductive health needs (Gatson, 1997).

### Community Support

The distinction between supportive policies and supportive communities is not always clear. In reality, government and workplace policies must work in cooperation with communities in order to support parents and their children. Because parenting has become an individualistic activity confined to nuclear families, the community and parenting connection is often overlooked by researchers, policy-makers, and program developers. However, the more informal community supports can greatly influence families' choices of parenting arrangements. Communities could encourage higher paternal participation by providing courses for fathers on subjects such as research on fatherhood as well as skill-building classes teaching child-care tasks (Geiger, 1996) and classes for boys teaching them the skills of child-care and housekeeping (Harper, 1980). Communities can reduce the stereotypes of men as less nurturing or less interested in children by publicizing images of men as nurturing caregivers in the media and by updating the curricula in schools to represent fathers and mothers as primary caregivers (Russell, 1983). Changes in the hospitals and medical professions are needed to fully include fathers in the care of their children and to encourage them to participate in the births of their children (Russell, 1983). Community centres can provide parent and child programs intended and advertised for mothers and fathers, rather than just mothers (Harper, 1980).

As part of the wider community, the academic community can influence attitudes about gender roles and help open the door for fathers to become primary caregivers by teaching young male students to see the constructed nature of gender stereotypes and by researching men's experiences of caregiving. Researching these areas inevitably, also means researching men's experience of work-family tensions and gender roles. Silverstein and Phares (1996) assert that "helping families balance employment and family roles is a

pressing public need” and they challenge psychologists to “help the public define and pursue its own interests” and “advance policy agenda” by moving beyond the “mother-infant dyad” to include fathers in their research and discussions (p. 50). In her summary of research on fathers as primary caregivers, Radin (1996) calls for further research on changes to parental roles as well as on the impact on the children. She also points out the need for cross-cultural and cross-ethnic research using the same core instruments as previous studies. Russell (1999) recommends that future studies include larger samples of randomly selected families using a longitudinal design (1999, p. 79). He predicts that more families will find themselves with a father as a primary caregiver out of economic necessity, and he suggests studying this type of family separately from families that choose such an arrangement. In an earlier book in which he compares his research on families with a primary caregiving father to families with a traditional father, Russell (1983) advises research focussing on the interaction between people’s work and family roles:

The area which is likely to provide both the greatest potential for change and the greatest potential for conflict and tension is the interface between the individual, paid work, and the family. It is the further exploration of this interface which should prove the most fruitful for our understanding of changes in family patterns. (p. 221)

By researching these suggested areas, academics can further society’s understanding of stay-at-home fathers and promote the expansion of male roles to include the private sphere as women expand their roles to include the public sphere.

### **Literature Review Conclusion**

Whether changes happen at a policy level, a community level, or with one father at a time, Russell (1996) predicts that we will see more fathers engaged in primary caregiving, but it will be a slow process of change. He explains that change will be slow because “the

forces to maintain the *status quo* are much stronger than those pushing for change” and that what is needed is change at several levels – “beliefs and attitudes, social policy, education, economic and employment and political structures” (p. 221). Harper (1980) echoes the need for change at more than just the personal level:

If men are to return to home and children, however, it is not enough for them to discover a change in consciousness and the joys of the private sphere. There must also be changes in the constructions of society, and an alteration in the barriers standing in the way of this return. (p. 222)

Though a scan of the literature revealed no interest in or discussion of primary caregiver fathers within community psychology, it appears to be a social issue in need of a community psychology perspective from which one can analyze this personal phenomenon within its wider societal and community context. Hence, I decided to pursue this topic for my thesis project.

## **Methodology**

In this section I describe the research methods employed, outline research questions, explain my methodological assumptions, describe the research context, and explain how I found participants. I also describe how I gathered and then analyzed the data in such a way as to ensure that the research was ethical and the findings were trustworthy. Methodology does not help us understand the context of stay-at-home dads but is included in this section because the reader needs to know the methodology used in order to understand the research findings. I gathered data for this thesis through three methods: a literature review, a written questionnaire, and interviews.

### **Methodological Assumptions**

This research was guided by a paradigm of constructivism with a goal of increasing understanding and effecting positive social change (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merrick, 1999). Predominantly qualitative methods have been chosen because qualitative research is particularly appropriate for studying the family in that it has the potential to analyze the macro and micro areas of influence and it balances subjectivity with objectivity (Ambert et al., 1995). The questionnaire was largely qualitative with many open-ended questions but also contained a few quantitative questions often asking for demographic information. I believe that for my topic, qualitative methods best contribute to knowledge and theory of the area by

giving voice to those not heard before; studying family groups that are difficult to access, and family situations that are emerging; by advancing new theories or amending previously accepted ones; or by correcting biases in previous research, asking questions that have never been asked, presenting new epistemologies, or

highlighting the values that are at the foundation of the research questions that we ask. (Ambert et al., p. 883)

Qualitative methods also fit with the core values of community psychology and they serve as an effective way of “understanding the ‘why’ of human behavior” (Merrick, 1999, p. 488). As the researcher I am not an expert but a “passionate participant” and facilitator in this research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112). I do not claim objectivity; I seek to understand so that I can attempt to change society. I know that my biases will affect everything that I do, so rather than hide them I have made them public by stating them in the beginning of this thesis.

### **Research Questions**

My research questions originated from a variety of sources but primarily grew out of my personal interest in why so few fathers choose to be full-time parents and wanting to know what changes we in society need to undertake in order to make full-time parenting a viable and attractive option for fathers. I was curious as to whether or not stay-at-home dads even existed in Ontario. If they did, I was also curious as to what motivated these men to choose such an unusual role and what sustained them in their role as full-time parent when there seemed to be significant social pressure to choose the role of breadwinner. As an activist for social justice, I wanted to know whether or not these fathers were influencing wider social change or whether they were just social anomalies that soon would disappear.

The main research topics that determined the specific questions I included were:

- What hinders fathers from choosing or continuing to be primary caregivers?
- What are the best and worst things about being a stay-at-home father?
- Do community members and workplaces tend to be supportive or unsupportive of fathers choosing to stay home full-time?
- How do community programs hinder/support stay-at-home fathers?

- How do governmental policies hinder/support stay-at-home fathers?
- How can community programs and governmental policies encourage/support fathers to be primary caregivers?
- Are stay-at-home fathers influencing wider social change?

I also included several questions similar to ones asked by other researchers studying stay-at-home dads with the hopes of comparing the findings from the studies but with such a small sample size these kind of comparisons were not appropriate. The questions in the were quite wide-ranging: they asked about demographic information, about the experiences of SAHDs, and about SAHDs' perspectives on larger societal issues such as the role of the government, the workplace, and social and financial pressures in discouraging or encouraging fathers to parent full-time. The questions can be condensed into four main areas. These areas are: 1) motivations for full-time parenting, 2) experiences as a stay-at-home father, 3) responses of workplaces, family members and community members, and 4) barriers/encouragements to being a full-time father.

The interview questions emerged from the questionnaire responses. I chose to focus the interview on society's values around parenting because I believed that the lack of value for parenting was a major structural barrier often overlooked by previous researchers.

### **The Research Context**

The research was carried out in Ontario, Canada with all participants located in southwestern Ontario. The questionnaires were sent via electronic mailing lists and regular mail to the fathers' homes in October and November of 2001. (See Appendix A containing invitations to participants.) The participants returned questionnaires to me via electronic mailing lists or regular mail. I continued to accept questionnaires until December 12, 2001 when I ended the data-gathering phase with 19 completed questionnaires. I then chose 3

participants who indicated an awareness of structural barriers from the questionnaire and interviewed them over the phone or in their home, depending on each one's preference.

### **Participants and Sampling**

I set the criteria for who qualified as a stay-at-home dad as a heterosexual father in a committed relationship who is or was the primary caregiver of his children for 30 hours a week or more for the duration of a year or more. I decided on this definition after reading the wide-ranging criteria from other studies. Unlike some of the other studies that required less than 26 hours of primary caregiving a week (Grbich, 1987; Lamb, 1982; Russell, 1983), I wanted the hours of caregiving to be closer to those of a full-time job while still allowing enough flexibility in the definition that I could find participants. My goal was to find fathers whose focus was childraising even if they did engage in some form of part-time work. I sent the questionnaire to approximately 25 stay-at-home fathers who expressed interest in my study. Nineteen of those fathers returned the questionnaire to me and I interviewed three of them who had expressed willingness to do an interview. I found the fathers through the snowball sampling method (Patton, 1990, p. 176). Friends and community contacts recommended fathers who they thought would meet the qualifications of the study. I then phoned them or sent them an e-mail inviting them to join in this study. I then asked the first few stay-at-home fathers I found if they knew of other fathers I could invite to join in the study. I posted a brief advertisement (see Appendix A) on several electronic mailing lists which I am personally connected to asking people to contact me if they knew of any stay-at-home dads in Ontario who met the qualifications of the study. The electronic mailing lists used to advertise were the Wilfrid Laurier University



Psychology Department, the Region of Waterloo Community Health Department, and Christian Peacemaker Teams Ontario. I recruited 17 SAHDs through word of mouth and electronic mailing lists. I also posted a notice and the questionnaire on a website called [www.Fathersworld.com](http://www.Fathersworld.com) where I asked fathers from Ontario to fill out the questionnaire and send it to me. Unfortunately, due to lack of volunteers at this website the notice was not posted until early December and the five stay-at-home dads who saw the notice and indicated interest contacted me after I had ended the data-gathering phase. I also put an advertisement in a local classified ad paper called "The Pennysaver" (distributed to most of the households in Waterloo Region) and an additional ad for one day in the "Toronto Star." Two SAHDs found out about the study through "The Pennysaver" and contacted me in order to participate. I did not receive any calls as a result of the ad in the "Toronto Star."

I invited questionnaire respondents to participate in an interview and asked them to indicate if they were willing to give an interview by filling in their name and contact information at the end of the questionnaire. The attached Study Information Letter (see Appendix B) served as a consent form. Respondents were not obligated to participate in an interview, and it was strictly voluntary. I chose the interview participants from the 15 questionnaire respondents who indicated willingness to be interviewed. I chose the interviewees based on their awareness of structural issues as reflected by their responses to the questionnaire, their availability, and the fact that one interviewee lived in a rural community.

I intended to limit the fathers included in this research to those who are in a long-term committed relationship, are heterosexual, spend 30 hours a week or more as their child's/children's sole caregiver and have held the role of primary caregiver for longer than

one year or plan to continue it for longer than one year. In reality, one father did not fit this criteria (he is separated from his spouse even though they are technically still married), yet I included him because of the richness of his questionnaire responses. I limited the study to heterosexual fathers in order to hold constant the variable of a heterosexual partnership and in order to analyze partners living with the pressures to conform to traditional mother/father and wife/husband roles. I also chose this limit to be consistent with previous studies of stay-at-home fathers that have only studied heterosexual fathers.

### **Gathering Information**

I conducted the data-gathering in two phases. The first phase consisted of quantitative and qualitative data-gathering through the questionnaire (see Appendix C). Using open-ended questions allowed the fathers to have the freedom to respond in their own words without me, the researcher, setting limits of choices for themes or content (Labaw, 1980). Some of the questions I asked were about why they chose their parenting role; what they liked most and least about their role; how people reacted to their choice of parenting role; how supportive of parenting they found their former work environment; and what they thought discouraged fathers from choosing to be primary caregivers of their children. I sent the questionnaire out by electronic mailing lists and regular mail and ask that the fathers complete it and send it back to me. A pre-stamped return envelope was included with each questionnaire sent through the regular mail. After two weeks I phoned or e-mailed prospective participants to prompt them to return the filled-out questionnaires. As I received the questionnaires, I entered the data, coded it, and summarized the findings to send them to interested participants for feedback. When 19 questionnaires had been

returned, I felt I had reached the saturation point and ended the first phase of data-gathering in order to proceed with the second phase of interviewing 3 of the participants (see Appendix D for the interview guide and Appendix E for the interview consent form).

This second phase focused on in-depth qualitative data gathered through hour-long interviews. Interviews with the participants provided a depth of information. I chose to conduct interviews because interviews can be a very powerful tool to understand a situation. "A good interview lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience not only to the interviewer but also to the interviewee" (Patton, 1990, p. 353). In their Swedish study of fathers on parental leave, Lamb, et al., (1982) used interviews with the new fathers because they believed them to be valuable for "determining why they behave in certain ways and what their attitudes and values are" (p. 123). I recorded the interviews onto an audio-cassette; I used an interview guide to keep the interview focussed (Patton, 1980) which I revised after analyzing the questionnaire responses. I deleted some of the questions in the original guide that looked at the competencies of SAHDs and made comparisons between the mother and father, because they were not relevant to the emerging focus of the thesis. Other questions such as ones asking why they chose their role or if they think that their parenting arrangement has had an effect on the wider community I deleted, because I felt that they had been thoroughly answered in the questionnaire responses. I also shifted the focus of the interview guide in order to discover more about the emerging themes of social and financial pressures and society's valuing of parenting (the revised interview guide can be found in Appendix D.) At the end of each interview I made notes on my observations and thoughts during the interview process. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and then gave each interviewee their transcript to ask for their feedback and to

ensure that they could make changes if they chose. I then coded and summarized the interviews and sent a summary to each interviewee and asked for his feedback.

### **Analyzing the Data**

Because the literature on SAHDs is so limited, the choices of literature-based questions and hypotheses were insufficient. Therefore I took an inductive approach and asked a broad range of questions. I then shifted the focus of the interviews to what the fathers emphasized as important in their questionnaire responses rather than what the limited literature deemed important (Ambert et al., 1995). I approached this study with broad research questions pertaining to what I thought would be important barriers and encouragements to SAHDs. The focus of these questions shifted as I learned from the SAHDs how significant a barrier the financial pressures of consumerism were to them.

I entered the quantitative data from the questionnaires into the SPSS program in order to calculate frequencies while coding the qualitative data (answers to open-ended questions on the questionnaire) using the NUD\*IST program. I coded the data using the “open coding” technique which involved dividing the data into different categories and then analyzing the different themes that emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I found the questionnaires easy to code since many of the themes were already neatly divided into categories by the questions. I asked for examples of how people have positively and negatively responded to their parenting arrangement in two different questions, so all I had to do was to look at the responses within the positive response category, for example, and categorize the kinds of positive responses into appropriate categories. I completed a summary of the questionnaire findings to send to participants who filled out the

questionnaire and who indicated interest in seeing the findings. I requested participants' feedback on the questionnaire findings if they had any comments or concerns but no one contacted me.

After transcribing the interviews and showing the transcriptions to the interviewees, I took a week to reflect on the data and review my original questions before beginning the coding process (Taylor & Botschner, 1998). I report the findings from the questionnaire and the interviews independently but in the discussion section of this thesis I combine the themes and discuss the study as a whole. I sent a summary of the thesis by email to interested participants in order to receive their feedback before editing the final copy of the thesis.

#### Data not Included in the Findings

I have not included certain data from the questionnaires in the questionnaire findings when the question was too ambiguous, less than 10 participants answered the question, or the question was not relevant to the focus of the research. The following questions were excluded based on lack of centrality to the research: items 3, 4, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29, and 77 (see Table 2). Due to the ambiguity of the wording of the question, I excluded two questions (items 8 and 68). So few participants answered the following questions that I excluded them: items 75, 76.

**Table 2: Questionnaire Items Excluded From Findings**

<b>Item excluded</b>	<b>Reason excluded</b>
3. Does anyone besides your spouse and children live with you? Yes or No 4. If yes, who? 21. Were you present at the birth of at least one of your children? Yes or No 22. Do they attend any type of child care/day care outside of the home? Yes or No	Lack of centrality to the research

<p>27. Who do you feel was more influential in the decision of this parenting arrangement? (please circle one) You or your spouse/partner</p> <p>28. What do you see as being your role/responsibility as a father? (Of the following choices please circle the five roles/responsibilities most important to you)...</p> <p>29. What do you see as being the MOTHER'S role/responsibility? (Of the following choices please circle the five roles/responsibilities most important for a mother)...</p> <p>77. How much did you know about childcare and parenting before you became a parent? (please check one)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I was very experienced and well-read in the area of childcare.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I had a lot of experience with childcare.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I read a lot about child care.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I was somewhat experienced and well-read in the area of childcare.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I was somewhat experienced in the area of childcare.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I had little experience in childcare.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I had read little in the area of childcare.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I had no experience in childcare or in reading about childcare.</p>	
<p>75. Had any man in management taken parental leave? Yes or No</p> <p>76. Had any manager reduced his work day or work week [a formal right in Sweden] to take care of children? (please check one of the following)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> managers have taken both parental leave and reduced work time</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> managers have taken one or the other</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no manager has taken either</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> I do not know</p>	<p>Too few participants answered the questions.</p>

### Verification of the Trustworthiness of the Data

I ensured trustworthiness of the data by asking for participants' feedback on the questionnaire summary, the transcript of each one's interview, and the rough draft of the thesis. By using more than one research instrument (interview and questionnaire) I increased the trustworthiness of the data. This use of more than one research instrument is called "triangulation" which strengthens the trustworthiness by compensating for the bias present in any one form of data (Patton, 1990). The guidance of a thesis advisor and

members of a thesis committee also verify the trustworthiness of the analysis by providing several different perspectives and continuous feedback. "If different observers looking at the same phenomenon or same person report similar levels of a variable, we say that the observations are reliable" (Posavac & Carey, 1997, p. 75). Reliability is increased by the fact that my advisor checked my coding of themes and agreed that I was categorizing in a logical and relevant way (Ambert et al., 1995). The depth of research (particularly through the interviews) and triangulation (multiple informants and multiple methods of data-gathering) indicate the validity of the research project.

Because the sample size is so small I make no claims of generalizability to the general population of SAHDs in Ontario or Canada, but describing the details of the research context allows others to ascertain whether the findings are transferable to their situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To be sure that I studied what I intended to I used a variety of methods to ask similar questions and a variety of questions about the same issue. Using an audit trail, including copies of correspondences with participants, sources of quotes, and the records of the coding process, I kept track of source data to increase the confirmability of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I checked transcripts for accuracy and completeness against audio versions, and then shared the transcripts and summary of the three interviews with each interviewee to ensure fairness and accuracy.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In order to make this a positive and ethical process for all involved, I made the interviews as safe an experience as possible. By giving the father a choice of holding the interview in his home (his territory) or over the phone, the interview process was as

comfortable as possible for the interviewee. To ensure that participants understood and accepted the terms of the research I used a consent form for each interview (Patton, 1980) (see Appendix E) and a Study Information Letter for each questionnaire with the completion of a questionnaire understood as consent (Pancer, 2001). In the written thesis, names of the fathers are never used to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees. The confidentiality of the participants who filled out a questionnaire was ensured by the fact that they did not need to ever give their names unless they wanted to participate in an interview. The content of the interviews was not anticipated to be traumatic or particularly disturbing for the interviewee and from all indications, it was not. If an interviewee had appeared upset and in need of counseling or if he desired counseling after the interview, I would have given him a brochure from a local counselling centre with a sliding payment scale.

I realize that the fact that I am a female researcher and the participants are all male could have presented a challenge. My being a woman could have made the participants uncomfortable or, by contrast, perhaps they felt freer to share their feelings with a woman. Because of the gender differences, I proceeded with the interviews with sensitivity and caution to safeguard the vulnerabilities of the interviewee and me, the interviewer. One of my advantages was that I was in a similar education and income bracket to many of the participants.

The risks to participants in this study were minimal. One possible risk was that even though confidentiality was assured, the small scale of the study might mean that they could possibly be identified through their quotes in the final thesis. By never using names and changing any identifying elements of the quotes I lessened this risk. Another risk was



that confidentiality could not be assured with communication over the Internet. Because some of the participants preferred to receive and return the questionnaire over the Internet, I notified them of this risk so that they could decide if they wanted to proceed with e-mail communication.

## ***Research Findings***

To aid us in further understanding the context of stay-at-home dads, including the economic, social and cultural trends (Prilleltensky, 2001) within which they operate, here are the findings from the questionnaire and the interviews. It is important to understand this context before we move to the next step of naming needs and proposing action for social change. These findings can help us understand the reality of being a SAHD including the joys, challenges, and the issues that they face. I include comments from 19 full-time fathers in Ontario who shared information about their lives as SAHDs as well as their perspectives on some of the issues surrounding their choice of parenting arrangement. I make no claim that these fathers represent the general reality of SAHDs in Ontario. They are just as biased and influenced by their life histories as I am. Nevertheless, I believe that by sharing their experiences and thoughts these fathers aid me and others, including the field of community psychology, in understanding many important issues of fathering and parenting. "Memory may sometimes be undependable, but how people perceive, recount, or interpret past events is surely as important as the events themselves" (Gerson, 1993, p. xi). The fathers in this study even remind us that we cannot separate the issues of fathering and parenting from the issues of the wider society such as economic justice and societal values.

## **Questionnaire Findings**

The questionnaire was long enough that it could easily have taken the SAHDs over an hour to complete. The length and details of their answers varied but, overall, the answers were very rich in detail and emotion. I categorize the responses under the four

main areas covered by the research questions: 1) motivations for full-time parenting, 2) experiences as a stay-at-home father, 3) responses of workplaces, family members and community members, and 4) barriers/encouragements to being a full-time father. I organized the descriptive information about the stay-at-home dads into a table. The responses to the questions on the questionnaire then led to revising the focus of the interview questions. The interview findings follow the questionnaire findings.

The SAHDs shared demographic information in response to a few of the questions in the questionnaire. Their responses help us see the diversity and similarity in the SAHDs who participated in this study.

**Table 3.**

**Descriptive Information on the Stay-at-Home Fathers**

How many stay-at-home dads (SAHDs) filled out the questionnaire?	19
Where do they live?	All live in southwestern Ontario. Three live in rural communities and 16 live in urban areas.
How old are the dads?	28 to 53 with an average age of 38
What is their highest level of education completed?	3 High School 2 College 10 Bachelors 3 Masters 1 Doctorate
What were their former occupations?	teacher engineer chef self-employed waiter architect bookbinder tractor trailer driver retail locksmith marketer musician landscaper grocery clerk

How many SAHDs work a few hours outside the home (5-20hrs/week)?	9 fathers work for an average of 11.2 hours/week outside of the home in the following areas: music art church work childcare limousine driving architect community consultant waiter bookbinding (The average hours worked for all 19 SAHDs is 5.31 hrs/week.)
How many hours do the wives of the SAHDs work outside the home?	All except two of the wives work full-time (over 35 hours/week) with the average hours worked (of the 19 wives) being 43 hours a week.
How many children do they have?	From 1 to 6 with the average being 2.58
How old are the children?	The ages of these children range from the youngest child in the family being 3 months to 17 years and the oldest child in the family being 1 year to 17 years.
Were the children breastfed? If so, for how long?	Yes, at least one child in each family was breastfed. The average number of months the children were breastfed was 11.4 months with the number of months of breastfeeding ranging from 1 month to 48 months.
How long have these dads been the primary caregiver (or how many years were they in the past)?	The average number of years was 4.8 with the longest time being 13 years and the shortest being 3 months.
How long do these dads plan to be the primary caregiver?	10 - around two years 1 - forever 1 - permanently 3 - indefinitely 3 - unsure 1 - no answer
Family income for 2000: \$10,001-\$20,000	5.3% (1)
Family income for 2000: \$20,001-\$30,000	5.3% (1)
Family income for 2000: \$30,001-\$40,000	0
Family income for 2000: \$40,001-\$60,000	36.8% (7)
Family income for 2000: \$60,001-\$80,000	15.8% (3)
Family income for 2000: \$80,001-\$100,000	26.3% (5)
Family income for 2000: over \$100,000	5.3% (1)

## **Motivation for Full-Time Parenting**

Why are these dads parenting full-time? Many reported the importance of having a parent raise the children.

*We felt strongly that one natural parent should raise the children and not have them grow up at daycare in front of strangers.*

Others reported the priority of family over work or career.

*We feel that this decision was really a "no brainer." Family is more important than career.*

Along with this priority is the fact that many of the dads believe that their children benefit from parent-care more than outside childcare. Some also reported the desire to share in the raising of their children with their spouses.

*To participate fully and in partnership with the raising of the children.*

Other dads emphasized the practical financial reasons they stayed home to raise the children. Eight dads reported that their wives making more money than they did was a main reason they stayed home. Others said that the particular situation of job flexibility, career desires, and work opportunities determined that the dad would stay home with the children.

*At the point when my wife and I first discussed the prospect of family, (she) had just been promoted into a customized position from which a traditional maternity leave would not have been possible. I, on the other hand, was in the midst of an M.A. with no sense of burning urgency to pick up a new career. Hence, our unusual arrangement was "born" from the strong desire which both (she) and I shared to have an at-home parent in conjunction with the equally strong desire to proceed with a family.*

One dad who has been the primary caregiver for 12 years explained how he and his spouse came to their parenting arrangement:

*My wife wanted to re-establish her medical practice once our youngest had been weaned. She was becoming very unhappy and depressed feeling trapped in "traditional" gender roles that we had adopted unthinkingly and which I was not prepared to start thinking about. I finally saw that her mental health and/or our marriage were at stake and something had to change. So she took a part-time job and we tried private childcare but the kids were not happy with it, and all our lives were chaotic. We had always agreed it would be better to have at least one parent at home with the kids. My wife kept asking why it couldn't be me since they were my kids too. After months of resisting the logic and justice of her arguments, I reluctantly acceded.*

#### Fathers' Beliefs About Women and Men

I was curious if SAHDs would be men with a feminist consciousness or identity and I wondered if this is what motivated them to take on the role of a full-time parent. I asked the fathers if they considered themselves a feminist and 9 replied yes while 10 replied no. So many people hold varying definitions of the word "feminist" that it is a "loaded" question, as one SAHD commented. I then asked if they support women's efforts for equality; 18 replied that yes they did support women's efforts for equality, while 1 replied no. I also wanted to know if the SAHDs held cultural stereotypes about women having a stronger parental instinct (i.e., natural inclination and abilities to parent) than men. The same number agreed that women have a parenting instinct (12) as agreed that men have a parenting instinct (12).

#### Prefer a Different Role?

In order to understand why they chose the role of a full-time father, and to understand if this was their first choice, I asked them if they would prefer a different role. When asked if they had ever considered ending their role, 8 said yes and 8 said no. When asked if they would prefer a different parenting arrangement, almost half of the dads indicated that they might or that they would (9). When asked what arrangement they would prefer, they responded as follows:

Both parents share in the at-home parenting (7)

Father alternate years at home with his spouse (1)  
 Wife stay home (1)

The strong theme of preferring to share the at-home parenting is well-articulated in the quote below.

*I have been a stay at home dad who feels that the best environment for children is with both parents, both separately and together. No parent should have to miss out on raising their child, and no child should have to miss out on time with both parents. Most of the families I know have stay at home moms and dads who work way too much. Both parents, as well as the children, suffer in this scenario, and if the parents' roles were reversed, this would be just as true. A family where one person works exclusively outside the home and the other works exclusively in the home is an unbalanced arrangement.*

*I don't think that fathers should be the primary caregiver, any more than I think mothers should be the primary caregiver. As a society, we need to start respecting parenting enough to allow both parents to have a positive, meaningful role in child rearing.*

At least one father indicated that he did not choose to stay home and would prefer a different arrangement. When I asked at the end of the questionnaire "Is there anything else you'd like to share or something that you think the researcher should know?" one of these fathers added the following questions and answers:

*Do I like it? 50% of the time.  
 Would I take a job that offered on site sitting service? Yes  
 Do I think my wife would do a better job at home? Yes  
 Would I be happier if she were home? Yes*

### **Experiences as a Stay-at-Home Father**

#### **The Division of Housework and Family Organizing**

These dads reported that they do an average of 65% of the housework while their wives do 34% (percentages do not equal 100% because of rounding). How do these spouses decide how to divide up the housework? They do so in a variety of ways. Most use a method of negotiation:

*Based on ability of whoever has more opinions about a particular task. Or interest.*

*We divided it up based on a few criteria: a) who was home (i.e., for cooking and cleaning), b) what we enjoy doing, and c) me not being allowed to do the laundry ;o)*

Some divide up the work based on each spouse's skills.

*Based on skill - I'm a professional chef therefore I cook. She doesn't mind cleaning. I'm better at maintenance/fixing etc, so I do it.*

Some make a decision based on values and a sense of fairness.

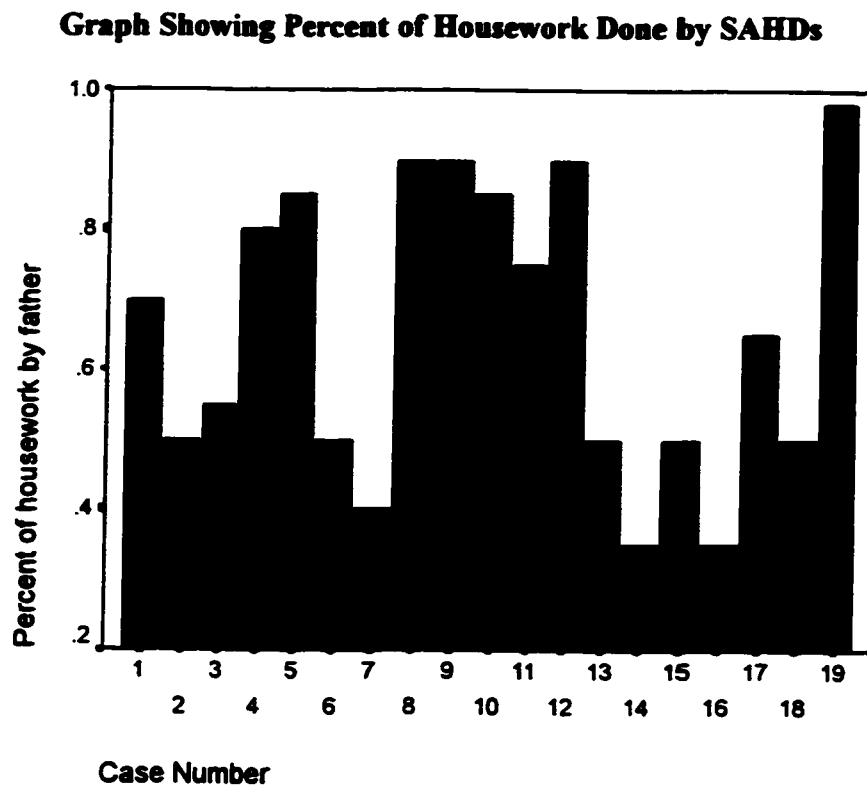
*I just assumed the extra workload when my wife returned to work full-time after maternity leave. How fair would it be if we divided the workload evenly if she was working full-time and I was at home full-time?*

Others do not make a conscious decision about how to divide the work.

*We don't consciously divide the housework. My wife sees what needs to be done and tells me to do it.*

See figure 2 for a visual representation of the percentage of housework the SAHDs report.

**Figure 2**

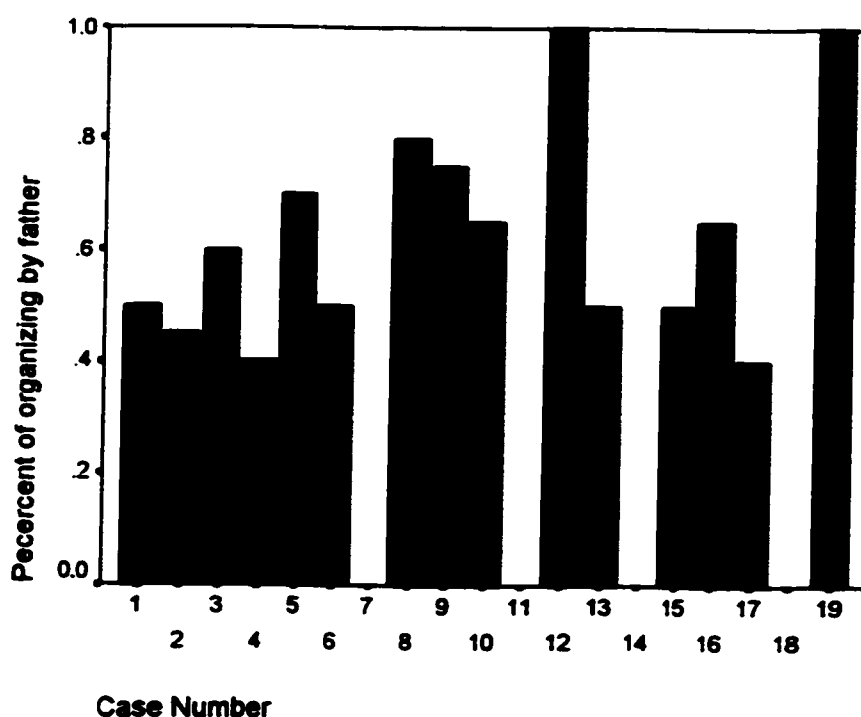




These dads reported that they do an average of 50% of the family organizing while their wives do 51% (numbers do not equal 100% because of rounding). Part of organizing responsibility is coordinating outside childcare. See Figure 3 for a visual representation of the amount of organizing the SAHDs report doing.

**Figure 3**

**Graph Showing Percent of Organizing Done by SAHDs**



When asked if their children attend childcare outside the home 7 SAHDs said yes, while 12 said no. Due to the ambiguity of the question I do not know if the number of hours they recorded indicates hours per child or total hours any child is in childcare.

### Community Influence

I wanted to know if the SAHDs felt that their role has an effect on the people around them in order to understand if the SAHDs saw their role as a part of wider social change or

more as a personal decision unaffected by nor affecting others around them. All but one of the dads felt that their choice to be a full-time parent has had at least a minor effect on the wider community. Many of them felt that their choice of parenting arrangement helps change attitudes and stereotypes of gender roles.

*It's good for people to see fathers involved with their children's care on a day to day basis. It increases the possibilities of the roles that fathers can see themselves playing. It is also good to have some men having experiences that women generally have. It helps men broaden their view of what women do.*

*I am an ambassador for discounting traditional gender roles.*

*Others know it can be done. Others may not be afraid to try. Deters from stereotyping.*

Others saw themselves as role-models of parenting alternatives and as a resource for other dads considering parenting full-time, particularly a full-time dad.

#### Consequences of Fathers as Full-Time Caregiver

What are the consequences of a father staying home to parent full-time? The dads were asked to list both positive and negative experiences. As with most of life's choices, there are advantages and drawbacks. Many dads mentioned the lack of respect and status as a negative result of becoming a full-time parent.

*No status/acceptance of male caregivers in my family and society at large. Being called Mr. Mom - I am not a mom. This continues to dismiss any role for men at home and implies I am usurping the "rightful" role of women which is to be the mom at home. I am a dad, not a wannabe mom.*

*Fathers are not perceived as great caregivers; second guessed by many people at almost every move.*

*Very little respect for the role from peers, family and friends.*

Many others felt that the fact that their spouse missed out on so much of the parenting was a negative result.

*My wife has much less time with our boys than she and they would like. She feels left out of their lives at times and finds it harder to relate to them than previously.*

*The biggest disadvantage has been that my partner feels she missed a lot of quality time with our son.*

Boredom and loneliness were often mentioned as drawbacks of being a full-time stay-at-home dad.

*There are no friends in the neighbourhood to share with and have relationships with. The women at home with kids are suspicious and uncomfortable if I drop over (so are their spouses).*

*It can get boring at times. You lack peer contact such as you would get at work.*

Others mentioned disadvantages such as missing their former careers and not liking housework, while some mentioned the inconvenience of not having breasts for breastfeeding.

All of the fathers also reported positive results of being at home full-time. Many mentioned their close relationships with their children as being an important positive result.

*I love it! I love the fact that my son and I go for a hike in the woods at least a couple of times a week, that we go to the park every day, that we play together and have fun, that I am an intricate part of his life, and he mine. I wouldn't give it up for anything.*

Many also mentioned the positive ways their spouse has been able to improve her career and/or her well-being as well as a strong and close marriage relationship.

*My wife feels free/empowered to concentrate/excel in her career/professional life.*

*My wife and I remain close, partly I think, because we have such a strong shared interest in our kids. I think I understand her better than some men understand their wives because I did some of the things that a woman does.*

Many dads like the variety and flexibility of the lifestyle of being a full-time parent that includes being outdoors and having the freedom to get involved in the community or other projects around the house. As well, some of the fathers felt that their being at home

meant that the household functioned more smoothly and with less chaos. Others also mentioned personal growth and change as a positive result of parenting full-time.

*I have become a more sensitive and caring person.*

## **Responses from Workplace, Family, and Community Members**

### **Influence of the Workplace**

While I listed the former occupations of the dads in Table 2 at the beginning of this summary, the following question still lingers: Did these fathers' work histories influence their decision to become full-time parents? When I asked them if their work history influenced their parenting choice, 13 replied that yes it had. There seems to be a strong connection between a father's work experience and his parenting decisions. When I asked them to explain how work influenced their decisions, 7 replied that their work had been (or still is) compatible with taking time to raise their children. Of these fathers who felt that their work was compatible 2 were musicians, 2 said that childraising fit with their educational goals, 1 said that he hadn't started his career yet, and 2 said that their work was flexible enough to allow them to parent full-time for awhile.

*I was a musician who didn't want to be on the road anymore and knew that I couldn't support my family from music earning. However, I still wanted to keep one foot in music so being at home allowed me to dabble in music without having to make a living at it.*

Six other dads reported that their decision to stay home was influenced by negative experiences in their job. Of these 6, 4 said that they were dissatisfied with their former work:

*I had an increasing level of dissatisfaction with the materialism and lack of moral values behind my work in chemical engineering [...]. That certainly made me more open to the decision about changing parenting roles.*

Although one father said that his low salary made the decision to stay home easy, another father said that the inflexibility of his work schedule and the schedule's incompatibility with childraising helped him decide to stay home full-time.

When I asked the dads if norms in the workplace prevented individuals from using "family friendly" programs such as parental leave, only 3 said yes while 14 said no. If these workplace norms did not prevent individuals from using programs and benefits, then what did? Before beginning this research I would have guessed that many of the SAHDs would have used the parental leave benefit provided by the Canadian government. In reality, only two fathers reported that they did take a parental leave from work after one of their children was born. Sixteen fathers said that they have never taken parental leave. The fact that parental leave has recently been lengthened may explain why some of the fathers whose children were born 5-10 years ago did not use this benefit. I wonder if breastfeeding is a factor in fathers' deciding to not stay home when the children are infants but instead waiting until they are older and weaned. I also asked if the fathers are satisfied with Canada's parental leave policy. Seven said no, while three said yes. The rest did not know or did not answer the question. Some of them were dissatisfied with the policy because of their wives' experiences with parental leave.

*As [my wife] was the bread-winner in the family, and the parental leave policy offered so little income replacement, she used holiday time as maternity leave – 3 weeks when our daughter was born, 6 weeks for our son's birth. This was a very uncomfortable situation.*

### Community Responses

How do people respond to the fact that the dads in most of these families are home full-time while the mother works outside the home full-time? Each dad reported at least one example of people responding positively to their parenting arrangement. Many reported positive comments from women more often than men.

*Moms seem thrilled/impressed that I stay home.*

Others felt that people envy their parenting arrangement.

*A father staying at home, to all of my close friends, was and is a non-issue. If anything, they are jealous. I guess this is why they are my close friends.*

*Females saying I'm a "keeper" as a husband or wishing their husbands would do similar things.*

Some found that people's affirmations of their choice to stay home came in the form of affirmations of their children and their relationships with their children.

*Neighbours note how healthy and happy kids look.*

*Many have commented that my children are very close to me and they've said that you don't often see the fathers being as close to their children.*

Because fathers who stay at home full-time with their children are still a rarity, I was curious if they experienced negative responses from people around them. Though 3 dads reported no experiences of negative responses, 16 gave examples of negativity they have experienced. The fact that so many SAHDs experienced disapproval for taking on a non-traditional role suggests that it is a gender issue, meaning that men may face greater disapproval than women in the role of a full-time parent. In fact, eight reported experiencing disapproval for prioritizing parenting over making money.

*My wife's parents were and still are quite upset and keep asking when I am going to get a job, hire a nanny and keep their daughter in the style which they think she deserves and expects.*

*Berated and told many times that you can't compare staying at home with your kids to getting up and going to work every morning.*

*Expressing caution about money/pension etc.*

*My wife is Portuguese and I know the male relations on that side of the family lost a great deal of respect for me when this arrangement became known to them. "It's just not what a man does." Nothing has ever been said to me directly but you can feel when a change in attitude is directed toward you.*

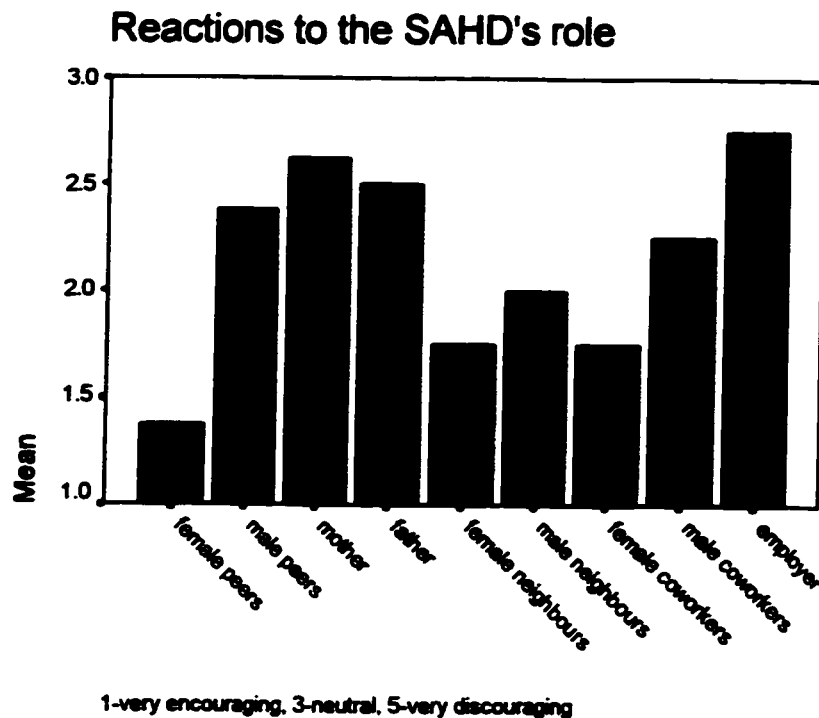
A few dads reported experiencing negativity in the form of suspicion and/or ostracism, sometimes from full-time mothers.

*Moms were very suspicious of me for first 2 months attending playgroup (I was the only dad).*

*Mothers have been worse. I was a parent volunteer in both junior and senior kindergarten classes for three years. Man, were some of the moms great at ignoring me or pointing out that I was male.*

The graph below (see Table 3) shows how the fathers rank people's reactions to their parenting arrangement. The lower the mean the more encouraging the SAHDs found that category of people (1=most encouraging, 2=encouraging, 3=neutral, 4=discouraging, 5=most discouraging). It is interesting to note that the most negative ranking for a particular group (when all the responses are averaged) is still less than 3 which means more encouraging than neutral.

**Figure 4**





Female peers were ranked the most encouraging ( $M = 1.33$ ) with female neighbours and coworkers close behind. While employers reactions were ranked as most neutral or least encouraging ( $M = 2.92$ ) and mothers received a similar ranking ( $M = 2.34$ ).

### **Barriers and encouragements to full-time fathering**

#### Social and Financial Pressures

When asked if they thought that social or financial pressures are more likely to discourage fathers from choosing the role of primary caregiver, the dads were divided almost equally on which they thought was the most discouraging pressure. Seven dads declared that social pressures are most likely to deter fathers from being caregivers and they gave a variety of explanations. Some emphasized the pressures to uphold stereotypical images of men and women in traditional roles.

*Most guys want to be seen as a man's-man, not susie homemaker. Socially - this is a woman's job.*

*I think it is harder for families to deal with the social pressures that would result from a voluntary choice for a father to be the primary caregiver countering society's assumption that male career ambitions come first and all the stereotypes around caregiving.*

Others pointed to broader societal structures and values as the main pressures discouraging men from choosing to be primary caregivers.

*I believe that prevalent values and expectations are essentially patriarchal.*

*Financial pressures are often really social pressures. Work of the home is not valued.*

Ten dads reported that finances are the deciding factor.

*Men, overall, still enjoy larger salaries than women. Men are more concerned about losing seniority, upward momentum, etc at work.*

*If it is not financially feasible for the dad to stay home, very few dads will even consider the option. Therefore, social issues/pressures do not come into play.*

At least one dad felt like it was fear of the unknown rather than social or financial pressures that deter men from choosing to be full-time parents.

*Many people that I talked to while [at home] would often say, "I wish I could afford to do that." Or, "I wish. My employer would never allow that." Perhaps they are right. I think that if a person wants to be at home with their children, they should just do that. It's not about structures and legislation as much as fear and the unknown.*

Interestingly, many of these same fathers who felt that financial pressures were more likely to hinder fathers from becoming primary caregivers also reported that finances had actually encouraged them in their decision to stay home. Six explained that because their wife made more money than they did, they felt encouraged to stay at home. Two dads noted that they and their spouse's high income-earning abilities were an encouragement to the dads in becoming the primary caregiver.

It appears that social and financial pressures both play a role in discouraging fathers from prioritizing parenting, and that the two pressures may be inseparable. One dad illustrated this interconnectedness between social and financial pressures. He believed that men often use financial reasons as an excuse to not have to challenge social pressures.

*In years gone by, there has been a big gap in female-male salaries, but even now that they are much closer, most men still use the financial reason to explain their deterrence, but truly I believe it is the social pressures that make the decision.*

#### Sources of Support

With all the financial and social pressures deterring fathers from or discouraging them in their full-time parenting, what or who are the primary sources of support for stay-at-home dads? When asked to rank seven categories (spouse, parents, friends, neighbours,

church community, spirituality, community programs, family besides parents) from most important to least important, the dads chose the following as top three.

**Table 4: Sources of Support**

<b>Most Important Source of Support</b>	<b>Second Most Important Source of Support</b>	<b>Third Most Important Source of Support</b>
Spouse (17)	Parents (5)	Friends (7)
Friends (1)	Family besides parents (4)	Family besides parents (5)
Spirituality/Faith (1)	Spirituality/Faith (3)	Parents (3)
	Friends (3)	Church (2)
	Community Programs (1)	Community Programs (1)
	Spouse (1)	
	Neighbours (1)	

When asked to name another form of support which is important, seven dads identified the following sources:

Personal time away from kids  
Home learning group  
Internet  
Catholic Family Counseling  
Sports teammates  
Older children  
Home Learners Association

#### Ways to encourage full-time parenting

The responses to this question can be lumped into the two categories: (1) ways that the government can encourage fathers to consider full-time parenting and (2) ways that society in general can encourage fathers to consider full-time parenting. Many dads feel that governmental financial incentives (or removing financial barriers) for full-time at-home parents would mean more men would consider parenting full-time.

*Somehow, whether it be male or female, stay at home primary caregivers need financial support. It is a 24/7 existence that is very demanding. Women have known this for eons, now some of them are in a position of power to do something about this. Have they? I don't know but financial assistance is crucial. Any adult male with one iota of intelligence will quickly warm to the new attitude of male primary caregivers in present day society. I really don't see that attitude adjustment though education is as big an issue as financial support.*

Five dads specifically mentioned that the Child Care Tax Benefit should be expanded to include parents who are full-time caregivers of their children (currently it only applies if a parent is paying a non-family member to provide childcare). Ten dads indicated that improved benefits such as parental leave would help encourage fathers to consider full-time parenting.

*I would like to see the parental leave policy offer more money to both parents for longer.*

*The government needs to give more financial incentive to men so that they don't lose financial benefits such as Canada Pension benefits and others.*

A few thought that benefits for self-employed parents and subsidized daycare would improve the situation. Several thought that enforced pay equity for women would mean that more men would choose to stay home.

Despite these financial pressures, many of the SAHDs indicated willingness to make additional sacrifices in order to continue in their role as primary caregiver. When asked if they would continue in their role if it meant a \$5,000 drop in their family income, all 19 SAHDs said yes. When the amount was raised to \$10,000, 15 SAHDs said they would still choose to continue in their role. Twelve SAHDs reported that they would still choose to stay in their role even if their incomes dropped by \$15,000.

Many of the dads also felt that in order to encourage men to be full-time parents, changes would have to happen in society. The biggest issue mentioned was the need to value full-time parenting. Many dads felt that society does not value parenting in general and still expects parents (especially fathers) to prioritize their job over their family.

Following are some of the changes the dads indicated that are needed.

*Increased societal value on homecare.*

*Cultural affirmation of parental care of children.*

*More education to the general population and the values [parenting] offers.*

Along with a change in values, some dads noted a need for a change in attitudes.

*Certainly a change in attitude. Men decide to make war. I guarantee that there would be a lot less men willing to send their own sons off to war if they spent the first 6 years of that child's life changing their dirty diaper.*

In addition to a change in attitudes others mentioned the need for a change in gender stereotypes.

*Help people realize they have both masculine and feminine characteristics.*

## **Conclusion**

In this research, I tried to discover the reason why so few fathers choose to be full-time parents and I hoped to learn what changes are needed to make this parenting choice more attractive and commonplace. With this focus in mind, the strong message I drew from the comments in the questionnaire was that the barriers to being a full-time dad are not always unique to dads. To be sure, fathers have the added pressures of gender stereotyping, but an equally significant pressure seemed to be to prioritize work and money-earning over family or child-raising. Still, these larger societal pressures or values are also gender-laden in that paid work (traditionally men's work) is valued over parenting (traditionally women's work). This valuing of paid work and material goods is often manifested in the way that the accumulation of material goods (or "toys" as one dad put it) is glorified over thrifty living. Prioritizing the accumulation of material goods often demands an income higher than one spouse can earn, which means that neither parent can

stay home with the children. I explore this message, as well as the gender issues, more in the interviews and in the discussion section.

### **Interview Findings**

The interviews provide a more in-depth understanding of the context of the SAHDs of this study. Though the interviews include the voices of only three SAHDs, they allow us an inside glimpse into what motivates or frustrates these three SAHDs and prompts reflection on how the motivations and frustrations might be similar or different for ourselves and other SAHDs.

If social and financial pressures are the most significant barriers to fathers becoming SAHDs, what does this mean? Together social and financial pressures are such a large encompassing area; how do we begin to analyze it or work to lessen the barriers? As you can see in the revised interview guide (Appendix E), I divided society into three areas - media, government, and the work world - and I asked the three SAHDs how these areas discourage or encourage them in their role as a full-time parent. I was interested in hearing whether or not these fathers felt that society valued the work of parenting. I was also interested in hearing their reactions to the fact that nearly half of the questionnaire respondents said that they would prefer to share parenting more equally with their spouse. Below I have taken the three interviews and categorized the comments into themes. To illustrate each theme I include quotes from the fathers. When the quote involves a dialogue between the father and myself, the researcher, I indicate this by labeling each comment as "Father" or "N B-D." If the quote is a freestanding comment from a father it is not labeled.

It was difficult to decide whom to interview when so many of the dads who filled out the questionnaire had indicated willingness to be interviewed. I knew that I was interested in knowing more about how social and financial pressures deter men from

parenting -- a strong theme that arose from the questionnaires -- so I chose three fathers who indicated an interest in these areas.

Here is a short description of each of the interviewed dads:

- One father is 37 years old and is a high school teacher who has taken year-long leaves to be a SAHD for two non-consecutive years. He currently has three children ages 1, 3, and 5 years old. His wife is presently the parent at home while he teaches. Their family income for the year 2000 was in the \$40,000-\$60,000 range. While he was at home he combined full-time parenting with odd jobs as a musician and artist. He and his family live near the downtown of a medium-sized city in an older residential area.
- One father is 29 years old and was a chef and small business instructor before becoming a SAHD. For over two years he has been the full-time parent for his children ages 3 years old and two and a half months. During this time he has also worked as a childcare provider for other children. Their family income for the year 2000 was in the \$40,000-\$60,000 range. His family also lives near the downtown of a medium-sized city in an older residential area.
- One father is 43 years old and was self-employed before deciding to stay home and care for his two children ages 10 and 11. He's been a SAHD for over 9 years and has managed to combine parenting work with occasional private consulting work out of his home. Their family income for the year 2000 was in the \$60,000-\$80,000 range. He and his family live in a rural area of Ontario.

## **Media**

I began by asking the fathers how they feel about their parenting role when they watch TV, read the paper, or listen to the radio. I asked: "Do the media have any influence on how you feel about being a full-time parent? How are your choices and your priorities affirmed and supported or discouraged? Is parenting valued?" Though some of the fathers indicated an annoyance with certain messages from the media that ignored or belittled fathers, their selectiveness in what media they surrounded themselves with and their ongoing critique of the media seemed to buffer them from much of the media's negative effects, at least conscious effects.



### Ignoring and/or Belittling Fathers

Two ways the media devalue fathers are by ignoring the presence of fathers in children's lives and then by showing them as inept parents. As with many of the fathers who filled out a questionnaire, two of the interviewed dads commented on aspects of the media that ignore the fathers' role in parenting and housework completely or that depicts fathers as bumbling fools. One father specifically mentioned a commercial for children's cough syrup and how it labels the mother as the "doctor" in the family who will take care of the sick child and administer the medicine. The following excerpt demonstrates his reaction to commercials like this one that ignore fathers' role in the care of children or housecleaning.

*Father: Robitussin commercials.*

*N B-D: Are those the Dr. Mom ones?*

*Father: Yeah, I hate those. (N B-D laughs) Oh and also the vacuum... it's not that I have a strong reaction, I shake my head in disbelief. What's that new brush that you put... is it whip-it or snip-it ...? Well with any vacuuming commercial, any floor cleaning... is a guy doing it? No!*

*What jumps to mind right now are those irritating commercials that say "This is mom. Mom does everything. Mom, cleans up the fingerprints on the tables." and Zellers "Help Mom with the Christmas shopping Sale"... That irritated me. Cuz only moms do Christmas shopping, you know.*

One father explained how fathers are consistently missing from magazine articles on parenting, even in parenting magazines.

*Read through an article on, I don't know, disciplining your toddler, you know, or where to draw the lines and how to react to your toddler freaking out or whatever. It reads like the mother is all by herself. Except that there is a mention of a spouse who goes out to work, or something, you know. But surely they're not involved in the decision-making as far as you know, raising the kids go. Like, that's the sense that you get from the articles.*

How does this ignoring of fathers' role affect the dads? One SAHD felt that this marginalized fathers like himself who want to be more involved and made them feel that

they were "encroaching on someone else's territory." This father went on to explain how it makes him feel.

*It just serves to additionally marginalize that group of dads that want to be more involved, are looking for some, I don't know, legitimization of their wish to be more involved with their kids.*

### Media's Messages About the Value of Parenting

The two fathers who had stronger feelings about the media felt that the media devalued parenting in a variety of ways such as reinforcing traditional gender roles, portraying fathers as inept, and romanticizing parenting to an unreachable ideal.

*I think they still assume 99.9% of active involved parents are female. I haven't yet found a parenting magazine that does anything but highlight dads on Father's Day.*

*N B-D: What about parenting more in general? Do you feel that what you hear and see in the media... does it feel like parenting is valued? I guess by parenting I should say more full-time parenting.*

*Father: No, I think it's devalued. They probably do [add to the insecurity] of less experienced fathers. You know, they say, "Oh my God, if that is, you know, if that is even average what where am I?" You know, and that might well scare some off.*

*It doesn't make sense to me because I think a good parent has to spend a lot of time being a parent and some of the scenarios [...] they don't show the rougher sides of being a parent. And you kind of go, "Wow." I think you're creating false expectations. And you realize it's a TV show but there is a portrayal that, well, "You're not able to do that?" Why can't you do this, can't do that? It's just, I think it paints unrealistic expectations about everything.*

But the media do not have to be a negative influence on full-time fathers. One father felt that the media could play a very positive role by supporting and encouraging fathers in their desire to be involved parents.

*I think if more dads could see some positive messages in the media I think they could feel a little bit better about making the choice about getting more involved with the kids a little. You know. If they get some inkling that society says that that's an OK thing, then they just might be nudged to take that step.*

*I think the media could go a long way to promote sort of a dual parenting style rather than the old "dad's the breadwinner and mom's the raiser of the kids" kind of thing.*

### Selecting and Critiquing the Media

Two of the fathers felt that the media did not discourage or deter them in their role as full-time parents. One father explained that he is very selective of what media he exposes himself to, and another felt that his critique of the media buffered or even reversed any negative effects on his parenting role.

*The only media that we really do here is read the newspaper and listen to CBC.*

*I'd like to think that they haven't influenced me that much. I tend to be a critic of the media. So maybe it has a reverse effect. They say one thing and I do the opposite, you know.*

### **Government Policies**

I asked the fathers whether and how they feel the Canadian government policies encourage or discourage them in their choice to parent full-time. I also asked if they saw any differences in how men and women are encouraged or discouraged in their parenting role by the policies. All of the dads reported ways that government policies could do better in supporting and encouraging full-time parents.

All three dads talked about the need for the government to support stay-at-home parents financially through tax credits or tax breaks.

*Perhaps, there could be some recognition when someone is at home - mother or father or whoever - either partner - maybe there could be some sort of financial incentive for them to stay home.*

*Government really does need to help families. Particularly ones that are struggling to make ends meet. And I think that they can do that through tax policy regardless which parent's away.*

*So, generally speaking, stay at home parents have one working spouse and then you have no claim. No claim for the value of you staying home, you know. The working parent is not allowed to claim an equivalent deduction for a spouse staying home to watch the kids which seems a little strange that the government would award you, in a way, to put your children into the care of a stranger and provide a disincentive for you keeping your children under the care of a parent. Which is, I mean, proven to be*

*more effective for the children. Your children are better adjusted and more whatever when they're in the care of one of the parents. And they could, I think if they built in an equivalent tax deduction for stay at home parents that would certainly be encouragement. It would help.*

One father pointed out that another way that the government can support SAHD is by better publicizing the benefits available to parents, especially fathers.

*A lot of new dads, especially first time dads don't know that they can take their paternity leave at the same time that their wife is on maternity.*

Other suggestions were to make public services such as transportation available for free to full-time parents and to encourage people to balance work and family needs by discouraging overtime and limiting work hours.

*On a smaller financial note but something I'd love to see them do is to make public services more available to the people who are at home. For example, it could be free transit, or free entrance to the... well the library is already free but there could be a greater emphasis on leisure activities even the swimming pools, or the skating rinks or anything that's already open. I know that they do this in some countries and it's always interested me. If you stay at home, you know, I think it's really a good thing for society in a way - less work and more leisure. And so I think that they could make some nice perks, it wouldn't even cost them that much.*

*I think the government should almost discourage people from working so much! Present legislation seems to encourage people to work more and more...for example an increased work week and all of the allowances for overtime.*

Some of the dads expressed their satisfaction with various aspects of the government's support to full-time parents. Two fathers were pleased with the parental leave available to fathers.

*I think it's sizeable. I think the dad gets 17 weeks, you know, so even if you don't want to take four months off you can at least take five or six weeks.*

*But I've seen a really healthy change with government. Like I think the idea of having one, having a year off, I think it is great.*

One father explained that because he and his wife decided to live on one income they have the advantage of being in a lower tax bracket and receiving more money back from the government as an income tax refund than they had expected.

*Our income is based on a year from September to September but our taxable year goes from January to December. If you take every other year off from teaching, even though you work for a full year you never have a full year of salary. One year you have two-thirds and the next year you have one third, and two-thirds and one-third. Especially the year when you're on one-third, you end up with your [income] statistically down in the poverty level of income so you get a little bit, a tiny little break. But I don't think the government has gone out of their way to say "Oh, here are some people making this choice and let's give them a break."*

Even though the fathers would like to see the government more actively support full-time parents, they were grateful for the existing support.

*I think, actually that the government's been quite good. I imagine that there's an awful lot of pressures from business not to do it. You know, they tend to be more like the Americans. Americans are so damn barbaric when it comes to the family. Not that we're great but I think that we're better off than the Americans.*

### **The World of Paid Work**

Next I asked the fathers, "When you think of the formal work world (your job, your wife's job, your field, your training, your former colleagues and employers) how do you feel that it influences your parenting choices and priorities? How does it discourage or encourage you in your parenting?" A couple of the fathers noted the double standards for women and men. Even though the policies may be gender-inclusive or gender-neutral, many work settings still disapprove of men rearranging their work days to accommodate their children's needs or taking leave from work to raise children.

*It [the work world] does not encourage guys to be the stay-at-home parent. That's for sure. More so the woman. I think there's a certain expectation that women have the babies, they'll be home nursing, hopefully, nursing their children for awhile, and that's the way nature planned it. (Father laughs) When a guy wants to stay home it's kind of like, "What?!" particularly if you're in sort of a leadership position at work.*

*They're written in gender neutral terms but I think there's still the perception that it would be frowned upon for a man to take advantage of those policies.*

*I know that my brother is in construction. No one has, no man has ever taken a leave of absence but the policy will allow it. The company will allow it but no one's taken it.*

The interviewees also noted that fathers risk losing status and upward mobility and reputation even more than women by staying home to raise their children for a few years.

*Father: I think [upward mobility is] a fairly large concern for other men. You know, if I stop work or go down to part-time hours in order to spend more time with my kids what does that do to my career progression? Is that going to affect my seniority? Am I going to be passed down for the next promotion? Am I gonna be chosen to go to that conference in Hawaii next year, you know? Will I ever get the corner office now? I think it's a big concern.*

*N B-D: You're saying that would actively discourage men from prioritizing their children.*

*Father: I think it does, I think it does. And there's a perception that it's somehow easier for women to get back into the work force after being with kids.*

Another father echoed the concern about having to re-enter the formal work world.

*Father: If I were to go to a traditional job and on my resume there was this huge block of time I think being a guy they would kind of wonder. That's kind of a weird, I really do think that. I think that would certainly...*

*N B-D: What would they wonder about?*

*Father: Well, I'm... how career driven am I? How am I oriented to helping the company grow? I think there's a relationship between how driven a person is and their performance at work.*

*N B-D: So basically wondering what your priorities would be, right?*

*Father: Yeah, I think so.*

*N B-D: Is that what being driven means, is your priority work or is your priority home?*

*Father: Yeah, are they going to be able to get you to work eighty hours a week?*

### Do Stay-at-Home Dads Feel Successful?

With so little affirmation of parenting work and all of the pressures especially on men to prioritize work in the career world in order to be successful, I wondered if these SAHDs struggled with feeling good about their work and themselves. I asked one of the dads, "Do

you feel successful in society's eyes?" Despite the fact that this same father says, "The career world thinks I'm nuts!" he still feels like a success when he sees how well his children are doing.

*N B-D: Do you feel successful in society's eyes?*

*Father: I think so. I just have to look at my kids for that, you know. We've got a three year-old - I mean she's supremely self-confident and outgoing and damn good looking and [Father laughs]. You know, she's smart and articulate, I mean at three.*

### **Fear of Living With Less Money**

When I asked the interviewees why more fathers do not choose to be a full-time parent at home with their children, they all three agreed that the fear of living on a lower income was a significant deterrent. Whether or not the fathers used words like "consumerism" or "materialism" to critique this fear and this pressure to make money, they all emphasized how difficult it is for men (and parents in general) to prioritize family over career/income and that this prioritizing is something that they struggle with themselves.

### **Financial Adjusting/Sacrificing**

All of the fathers mentioned the financial sacrifices they chose to make so that they could be home with their children full-time.

*It's not easy giving up an income. You know, in any situation because Lord knows we're still paying off student loans, and mortgage and renovation costs. I don't think my VISA has been down to three digits since we bought the house. You know, it's a different sort of life but it's only for a short time. When they get to school, then there's opportunity to do other things, you know. You can get back to work or work part-time or full-time when they're old enough to take themselves to school and back.*

This financial adjusting and sacrificing seems to be a major reason why more families do not live on one income with one parent staying at home with the children while they are young. Because these fathers have struggled with these decisions and the consequences, they know how difficult it can be. But a couple of them explained that grappling with the

*idea* of downsizing to living on one income seems to be almost as difficult as the actual act of downsizing. In order to live on one income most families need to adjust their spending habits or make key decisions so that they can afford to have a parent at home full-time. The ability to adjust a family's lifestyle and spending habits seems to be a family's greatest strength. The fear of making these lifestyle adjustments or not having a single income that is high enough to cover basic necessities seems to be among the biggest barriers to choosing the SAHD role.

*I think for some it's a question of perception. You know, they're not sure they can live off of one salary. You know. I know we can because [my wife's] salary now is equal to our combined salary five years ago [Father laughs]; or certainly when we got married. We're looking at almost nine years ago, you know, when we got married we were both still students. We didn't have money. We were dirt poor and so we figured out pretty quickly how to stretch nothing into something and we were there again the year [our daughter] was born. I was working contract to contract and [my wife] was on maternity leave for six months and like we had a yard sale to pay the mortgage in June. You know, there were no extras. So we know where our minimum is.*

*Once you are both working you become accustomed to a certain level of income. It seems to me that people, no matter what their income level, generally spend as much as they make, living at their income. We certainly do. Everyone basically spends all the money that they earn. No matter how much they make. It's hard to imagine earning less once you've become accustomed to a certain level of income. Deciding to stay at home, and earn less family income can create stress for people... they know they'll have to sacrifice and give up things but they can never be sure exactly which things are gonna go. It's very difficult to downsize. Many people start out - before children come along or whatever - start out at two jobs and start accumulating stuff, entering into a lifestyle that you know, participating at whatever level they are at. And then children come along and there's a new pressure then. Changes happen in their job. And it's not so much, I wouldn't say it's so much media or government as just that people get into a groove with their life. And then it's hard to get out of that groove because it's hard to imagine what it would look like if you didn't have that income. I can appreciate this financial pressure as it is true for us as well. Even with [my wife] being home right now and me teaching, my teacher's income is very good, definitely above the Canadian average or the Ontario. And, yet we go from month to month just wondering, "Are we going to have enough money?", "Is our mortgage payment going to bounce?" or whatever, you know. We sort of feel that pressure every month. And meanwhile, I would love to be working four days a week or less [Father laughs]. So, I know... I appreciate the pressure that people feel.*



The father in the preceeding quote explained the difficulty of downsizing or making changes in order to prioritize family over work as the challenge of "getting into a groove" of living. When I asked him what he meant by "getting into a groove" he gave an example from his family's life with an at-home parent.

*Well they [families] get into habits of spending. Habits of consumerism. Here is a small example of "getting in the groove." Just as an example: you can buy processed food like the ready-to-go lasagna or spaghetti sauce. We do this all the time. We get a jar of spaghetti sauce and a bag of noodles and a head of lettuce and a thing of Ceasar salad mix with dressing [Father laughs]. Because life is hectic and that's a meal you can ... it seems fairly reasonably nutritious and everybody likes it and in 15 minutes we can have a full meal with a candle on the table. Now, before we got more involved with children and so on, I wouldn't have thought of buying a jar of Ragu sauce. I would've picked up some tomatoes at the market or I would've just bought cans of tomatoes or I would've made my own sauce, leaving out all the extra sugar and oil in the sauce 'cause it doesn't need it, and it would take a lot longer. So "getting in the groove" is buying the Ragu sauce ... it's easy, fast, pretty good and relatively expensive, though affordable at our lifestyle. So now when I go grocery shopping, I pick up that little pasta meal kit. We'd like to plan our meals better than that but there's always a day every week when it's been a busy day and you don't have time to think about anything. This helps keep the home fairly calm. This is important at meal times.*

This example of the Ragu sauce shows the reality of how hectic family life can get even if one parent is home full-time, but the main point of the father sharing this example was to explain what he meant by "getting into a groove." He was trying to demonstrate how easy it is to unconsciously slip into lifestyle habits that require a higher family income and, consequently, may require both parents to work.

### Valuing Money Over Family Time

When "getting into the groove" includes high mortgage payments, car payments, lessons for the kids, vacations, entertainment, convenience appliances, and the like, these lifestyle choices demand an income high enough to cover all of the costs. The fathers, who made the choice to prioritize staying home to raise their children, critiqued society for

valuing money and material goods over being able to be with one's family and raise one's children:

*They all want to make family the number one choice but they can't. Some people would say, "Oh, you know, I could not take a year off I don't know what would happen." Or "We could never do that." And in my mind, I never really engaged in the debate with them because I just don't want to create that tension with them, but in the back of my mind I would say, "Yes you could. You could do it. If you want to you could do it. No you can't have the second car. You can't go to Florida this year, but you can take the year off. There's nothing preventing you from doing that. You might not have that job when you get back..."*

*Father: I would say if anything there's more lip service paid to [valuing family over money]. I think there's the romantic notion that we're all going to stay at home and be loving and kind parents. You know, the family is the most important thing. But I still think overall there's lip-service paid to it. Because people are still after the toys.*

*N B-D: The toys?*

*Father: Well yeah, who's got the largest boat and you know they want a mini van and something else in their driveway. Like the number of parents that are so driven to give their kids a thousand dollars worth of Christmas presents each as opposed to just taking them off to the theatre or the ballgame or hockey game. I think the content of parenting has changed.*

*N B-D: So that parents are prioritizing material goods over time...?*

*Father: Oh absolutely.*

*N B-D: Or quality time with their children?*

*Father: Absolutely. Yep.*

*When you have a system based on free enterprise and capitalism and so on - a macro thing. And then at the micro level or the individual level you have people that generally want more and more stuff and they're exposed to media that says they need more stuff. You put all that together and it's hard to discourage people from working incredible amounts of overtime and never taking a day off to be with their family, you know. It goes all the way down to the high school students who are in grade 11 and are working 20 or 30 hours a week.*

The first quote from this group of comments alludes to the sacrifices these dads are willing to make in order to prioritize their family over work such as losing a job or changing jobs.

The father ends his statement challenging other parents to consider changing their lifestyles in order to prioritize parenting with the comment: "You might not have that job when you get back..." Losing or changing jobs are examples of the unknown consequences of

prioritizing parenting. Several of the fathers talked about the fear of these unknown life changes as a significant barrier to fathers staying at home full-time or spouses sharing parenting at-home.

### Fear of the Unknown

Whether it is trying to share parenting by both working part-time or trying to live on one income, the fathers explained the reason for the lack of SAHDs and shared parenting is a fear of the unknown. Many people just do not consider something so unfamiliar or something so threatening to the comforts they have grown used to.

*Parents don't think about it [sharing parenting]. Well, it's a combination of things. They don't think about it and their employers don't consider it being an option.*

*Father: So many times when I was at home people would say to me, "Oh, that's so great that you are staying at home with your children. But I could never do that."*

*N B-D: Because of finances?*

*Father: No, because they're too afraid.*

*N B-D: Oh, really? They would say that?*

*Father: Well, they don't say that. I just think that. I would wonder what holds them back from taking the time at home away from work. Their response is often, "Well, we couldn't afford it." How do they know? They've never tried it. Or, you know, they have to have two cars. "We have to have two cars." Why? Why? "Well cuz we both go to two different places, we're both working in two different areas, we're both going here and there, the kids have to go here and there." Well, what would happen if you got rid of one car? "Well, we wouldn't be able to get to all those places." How do you know? You've never driven a bike. You've never taken a bus. You've never tried a taxi, you know, whatever. People have just never tried and they're afraid to try.*

### Key Decisions: Strengths or Barriers

I wanted to know how the father who named "getting into a groove" as the primary barrier to choosing to live on one income managed to stay out of "the groove." He explained the importance of key decisions that cause other more minor decisions to be made. He named the areas of key decisions as housing, location of house and work, media in the house, and transportation. The ability to make key decisions that allow a family to live on one income gives parents the option of parenting full-time. The inability or lack of interest in making a few key intentional decisions, therefore, discourages parents from considering and choosing to parent full-time.

*Father: When you make certain decisions, many other things fall into place. I like that. [...] I think that when you choose, I mean we struggle with it but if you make your family the first priority and it really is your center. And it really centers you; so many other things get decided for you and they're happy decisions.*

*N B-D: What do you mean "get decided for you"?*

*Father: Well, if you're staying at home you don't need a nice wardrobe so you're not really thinking, "Oh I really need a new pair of jeans or I really need to have a more stylish haircut or, you know, I can't go to work tomorrow looking like this." Things get put off, but you don't really even think about it as much. I think that it's sort of like getting into the habit of making decisions in the same way. Another small one is around television and media. If you don't have a TV or you don't watch it or it's put away somewhere where it's not in your main living space or something like that, then when you have some free time, after awhile it doesn't occur to you to go flip on the TV as a source of relaxation or entertainment or whatever. I know it's relaxing and entertaining for a lot of people. If you somewhere along the line decide not to have one, then you don't have to spend any time deciding what you're going to watch 'cause that decision is never presented.*

*I think your living accommodations is huge. The amount of money that you're going to end up paying for your house is, I think, one of our greatest expenses. When we bought this house we went initially to the bank to start discussing mortgages and all this stuff and we were both teaching at the time with no children and we had been pre-approved for a mortgage twice as big as this house. And without a lot of discussion, we asked the banker what amount would we be pre-approved for if we only had one income? And they gave us an amount and we decided that we would search for a house that was on that level so that even though we're both working if we ever decided to reduce to half time or one of us working and one of us not that we could still remain in the same house. We would never have to downsize or change where we were living. That decision was not a big conscious discernment for us. It was just a decision to not build our lives around the house that we live in. And this was before we had given any thought to making the family priority. It was a decision to "just keep it simple." And now, we both reflect back and say that was one of the greatest decisions we made.*

Another father explained the lack of SAHDs in a similar way by saying that people do not tend to make intentional decisions — they just go along with what others are doing around them.

*They don't have to make decisions - they just go along with the flow. This is the way things are and they accept it.*

Making these key decisions may seem like a straight-forward and logical process but in reality one's values continually influence one's decision-making. Religious values, for

example, may play a role in how we make key decisions. Making key decisions in favour of prioritizing parenting often requires shifting one's values, which can be a less straightforward, logical, and easy process.

### Consumerism

We can see that a family has to be able to live on one income if they want the option of a parent home full-time with the children. Parents have a particularly difficult time choosing to live on one income when the societal norm and the societal definition of success is material wealth. In the interviews and questionnaires the SAHDs made it very clear that financial considerations made their role difficult and deterred other fathers from becoming SAHDs. Recognizing that some families in Canada struggle with very real poverty, financial considerations for most Canadians are not usually objective decisions about surviving or perishing. They are usually very subjective decisions in which we try to juggle priorities while influenced by the views, norms, and priorities of those around us as well as by our own histories and experiences. Those societal values that glorify the accumulation of material goods are what I mean by consumerism. In the interviews, the fathers emphasized the powerful pull of consumerism and how it not only deters other fathers from becoming SAHDs but how it is internalized and challenges these SAHDs and their choice to be home full-time.

*I think a lot of people's perception of what is a necessity is a little bit skewed. We don't have cable - that's not a necessity. Some people would argue that. Like that's forty bucks a month. I don't know that's probably almost \$500 bucks a year. That's a mortgage payment. You know, so ditch it. We've got bunny ears. So fine. I get four channels. Well, okay, I suppose that means I can't spend my whole day sitting in front of the TV [Father laughs].*

*I think that guys still suffer from that 80's mentality of working and making a lot of money and having sort of that consumerism of the 80's. You want the corner office*

*and we want the two cars in the driveway and we want the big house in the burbs and, you know. We obviously chose not to do that.*

*There's a great emphasis to get toys and I think it's more of a problem in larger centers. It's a double-whammy there because it costs more to live there. Then all your neighbours, if you're suburban, they've got the brand new Windstar and they've taken the kids off to Disneyland... So yes there's that emphasis on acquiring toys or doing things that require a lot of money. You know, or your kids belong to three or four extra curricular activities and you've got to shuttle them around and that justifies why you need the great big seven passenger van.*

*There's also that whole consumer buy buy buy and they feel they need to have these things. You know, their kids have to have the Nike products, you know. Rather than having the thirty dollar running shoes from Zellers they've got to go off to Sports Check and spend a hundred.*

*We're such a consumer-oriented society and I think that has priority over the role of parents. Money doesn't necessarily mean that you're a good parent.*

The following is an excerpt from a dialogue between a SAHD and me, the interviewer.

*Father: Recently a number of our friends bought large houses out in the suburbs. They're beautiful big houses with two garages, a nice family room, and all the trimmings. Nice big spacious kitchens... Three families that we're close to have all moved in the last year into big houses and naturally we've been there for celebrations and gatherings. Both [my wife] and I were very surprised with our own feelings around that. Because for the last ten years we've been living downtown in this house or another one just like it and loving going to the market and loving all the things that we love about being here. We were always confident and assured with the decisions we had been making, especially regarding lifestyle and all of our friends would say, "Oh you guys have made good decisions and we admire you. And this is great." And then we go out to these houses and we both come home in the evening looking at our tiny little house that is a total mess with no storage space. Tiny little lot. And you go, "Ohhh. We need an addition." We've had to do a lot of thinking and processing about that. We had to really remind ourselves about why it is that we live here and why is this good for us and our children and also to check our emotions and feelings towards our friends who are in these larger homes and not be judgmental, self-righteous, and you know. Because all of them are in homes that require both partners to work full-time. After a trip out to the suburbs to our friends places we come home and usually the first question is, "How do they afford that? How do they manage? Did they win the lottery or what?" I don't know if it's peer pressure or what's active in all of those feelings that our own accommodations here are inadequate... But that's been a real challenge for us over the last year and we've been processing that and thinking. And even sitting down with [my wife] and I and just saying, "Ok, let's look at what's great about this house? What's great about this neighbourhood? And should we stay or should we be looking at something else with*

*a family room that's got a fireplace, you know. Would that make us happy?" And so, we're back to being content with where we're at. But it is a challenge. One of the comments that we make when we look at this house is we say, "If we lived in one of those places we'd both be working." And that's just a given, "No, we're not going to both be working." So then you have to say, "Ok, let's keep reminding ourselves about what we like about this house." We've got a great rink in the back yard, you know. It's the perfect size, it's flat, it's easy to make a rink back there [Father laughs] the hose is close, you know. And...*

*N B-D: It's not so much that your friends are coming in here and saying, "Oh what a small house you have."*

*Father: Right.*

*N B-D: It's internalized.*

*Father: Yes.*

These fathers' middle-class perspectives are apparent in their comments about financial sacrifices and the assumption that a family can live on one income if that family makes the necessary adjustments. Many of the comments and challenges from these fathers would not apply to Canadian families trying to survive on a low income. Statistics Canada defines a low income for a four-person family unit in an urban area with a population of 30,000 to 99,999 in the year 2000 as below \$28,392 (Paquet, 2001, p. 28). The interviewed fathers' reported their family incomes as at least \$10,000 higher than this definition of low income. Two of the interviewees family incomes were in the range of \$40,000-\$60,000 while one was in the \$60,000-\$80,000 range. According to Statistics Canada (1998), 8.1% of Canadians (individuals, not families) between the ages of 18 and 64 live on a low-income (p. 12). The messages and challenges from the SAHDs in this study may not apply to that 8.1% who may find it impossible to survive on one income, but they may apply to the rest of Canadians who live on similar or higher incomes.

### **Peer Support**

Another way that families find the strength to live on one income and prioritize family over work and wealth is through the support of one's spouse and peers. Sadly, it



seems that the peer support may often be lacking. Only one father emphasized the important support that friends give him and his family, as he and his partner try to prioritize family over work and material wealth.

*Well [my wife] is very grounded in keeping things simple. For me anyway. I'm the one who often thinks, "Oh I'd love to have... bigger space or an addition on the back or something." So for me [my wife] is one person who really grounds me. We also have a circle of friends who, other than those few families who've gone upscale, we do have friends and family who are living simply, sort of, like us. Or whatever. I know there's more things we could do. There are also people around who are making similar choices or trying to live simply and they're having a good life. And they're doing things in a way that we admire. We admire them for it and respect them for it and appreciate their role-modeling. And some of them we don't even see regularly. Like Bob [name changed]. He bikes everywhere. And when I see him biking by - and I may not even have a chance to talk to him but I'm just inspired. I think, "Way to go Bob!" You know? And the [name of a family] where they have the great garden in the back. Well we're not exactly good gardeners. We just haven't found that yet but the fact that they're doing it is very encouraging. I feel very blessed, very lucky. Despite the media and outside forces that encourage you to consume or go upscale, we have lots of friends and family and influences that encourage us to keep it simple. I feel very fortunate to have those people in our lives.*

Another father felt that the responses and support he received from peers was more a mixture of genuine approval and even envy with a concern about his abilities as a parent.

This ambivalent peer support did not seem to negatively affect him but it might discourage other SAHDs from choosing that role or continuing in that role.

*Everybody that I've run into the last two years that I've been at home have said, "Wow really! Well good for you." You know. They're surprised, they're a little bit shocked but they're generally sort of... Even though you get sort of an equal number of you know people saying, "Gee that's great." With a little look of envy in their eye like, "I wish my husband would be a bit more involved." And there's a little bit - almost a twinge - of almost fear in their eyes that says, "Geez, those poor kids." or "Are you sure that you know what you are doing?" So it's still kind of 50/50 but everyone says, "Oh that's great!"*

*I've had actually a fair number of guys, more or less my own age, you know speak enviously of me. Saying I wish I could spend more time with the kids while they're young. They're only 0-5 once and then the school system gets them and their peers take over. And help us all! [Father laughs]*

## Shared Parenting

I asked the fathers I interviewed what they thought of the fact that nearly half of the questionnaire respondents said that they would prefer to share the parenting more equally with their spouses. One father was not surprised but explained that sharing the parenting and income-earning 50/50 in his family would be too chaotic with parents trading roles half-way through the day. Another father thought that his wife would prefer to share the parenting more equally but he was pretty happy with the current arrangement since he is able to develop his skills and career in conjunction with parenting. The last father agreed that sharing the parenting equally would be the best. He explained:

*I think it's, on one level it's better for the kids to have equal exposure to both parents because Tony and I parent differently, we do. We agree on the house rules. And methods of enforcement and that sort of thing but we're different people you know so we deal with the kids in different ways and I think it's good for the kids to learn how to deal with different people, you know. As opposed to, you know, mom always lets me do this. You know, that kind of where they know how to deal with mom or with dad and the other person is sort of relegated to fun-time play-guy or whatever. You know. Or one parent ends up being the authoritarian the disciplinarian and the other one ends up being you know someone you see rarely or less frequently so when you do see them you do fun things with them. Dad's going to take you to the park today because it's his day off whereas if you step out of line, you know, mom will call you on it. That kind of thing. So I think it's better for the kids to have sort of an equal share of both parents and I think, I mean, parents feel better sharing it, I think. I think today's sense of a balanced relationship is one in which both parents take an equal share in the household management and the raising of the kids and whatever. And whether it actually turns out to be exactly equal, is up for some debate, you know, but certainly moms feel that they need to be very involved.*

## Conclusion of Interview Findings

Interviewing these dads was such a pleasure and so thought-provoking I wish I had had the time and resources to interview twice as many dads. Though the number of interviewees is small, the themes they emphasized were surprisingly similar. I am sure if I

had chosen to interview full-time fathers who indicated less interest in structural barriers or dads with higher incomes, the responses would be more varied. But because I wanted to focus on the role that structural barriers such as societal values play in discouraging or encouraging fathers to consider parenting full-time, I was not as interested in a wide range of perspectives and, therefore, the chosen fathers added depth and understanding to this area of focus. The thoughts these dads shared on financial sacrifice, decision-making, and lifestyle changes form a strong message challenging other parents with middle and upper-level incomes to prioritize parenting, if that is what they say they want to do.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study contain many different and important themes from both the questionnaires and the interviews. This section of the thesis gives me the writer and you the reader a chance to reflect on the context of SAHDs before we proceed to the next steps of naming the needs and proposing changes. I am choosing to highlight what I think is most interesting and most important. I want this study to do more than provide interesting, but trivial, information; I want it to challenge people to think about their parenting choices and their priorities as it has challenged me to think about my own choices and priorities. I want the findings of this study to motivate people to act upon their priorities and values as I have been motivated to act. This study provides not only a deeper understanding of a small, marginalized, and often overlooked population -- SAHDs. It also explores some of the significant structural barriers that parents face in general. Though the sample size of this study is small, the richness of the qualitative data and the consistent themes emerging across the different SAHDs give me confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings. However, generalizing or transferring the findings to other fathers is not appropriate.

The following themes emerged from the questionnaire responses and interviews. The full-time fathers in this study face some unique gender dynamics in their parental roles. Some of the interesting gender dynamics are that they tend to do more housework than the average father, few of them take parental leave, they tend to not be involved in community programs, and almost half of them would prefer to share the parenting more equally with their spouse. Full-time dads also receive a unique combination of negative and positive responses to their role because they are male. As all good research should, this study raises

more questions than it answers. I include some of these questions at the end of the following sections' discussion of specific themes.

Since this research involves such a small sample of SAHDs and the sample was not chosen randomly nor was it representative of the general population, I cannot generalize the findings of this study to the wider population of SAHDs in Ontario or Canada. I provide details about demographics of the participants and the context of the study (see Questionnaire Findings) so that you, the reader, can decide what from this study might be transferable to other contexts.

The difficulty in comparing the findings of this study to other studies of SAHDs is that (a) so few studies exist; and (b) the few studies that do exist focused on very different research questions from the questions in my study. First of all, I have found no indication of any studies on SAHDs in Canada besides an article using Statistics Canada data to estimate how many SAHDs exist in Canada (Marshall, 1998). Of the few studies that have been conducted in other countries, many of these researchers chose to focus on the development of children with SAHDs and the competencies of SAHDs rather than SAHDs' environment and barriers/encouragements to being a SAHD (Geiger, 1996; Radin, 1982; Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, & Frodi, 1982; Sagi, 1982). Robert Frank's (1998) research in the U.S., for example, is ongoing and groundbreaking and yet only one of his listed research goals is similar to mine: "To learn how dads feel about their at-home roles" (p. 1).

The studies most relevant to this study's themes pertained to shared parenting rather than full-time fathers. Dienhart's Reshaping fatherhood: The social construction of shared parenting (1998), an Ontario study on shared parenting and fatherhood, and Coltrane's book (1996) on fatherhood, housework, and gender equity (with a focus on couples who share

parenting) both contain similar themes to each other and to my study. All three studies found that participants named similar motivations for choosing their parenting arrangement, reactions from people around them, and additional isolation and affirmations that fathers face when they take on childcare and housework responsibilities. Russell's research into families with traditional (breadwinner) and nontraditional (SAHDs) fathers in Australia also illustrates these same themes (1983).

### **Motivations for Full-time Parenting**

Most of the SAHDs reported that they decided to become primary caregivers because they wanted a parent to raise the children rather than a babysitter and/or because their wife made more money than they did, so it made sense for the father to stay home with the children. Frank (1998) and other researchers (Geiger, 1996; Zimmerman, 2000) report similar findings. According to Frank's studies (1998), 65% of the fathers chose their parenting arrangement because they did not want to put their children into day care. Thirteen of the SAHDs in my study named the desire to raise their own children or the refusal to put their children in day care because of concerns about the quality of day care and the effect of day care on their children's mental and moral development as a main reason why they became a SAHD. These findings indicating why fathers become primary caregivers seem straightforward. The question that remains is why do more fathers not choose to be primary caregivers for these same reasons? Do other fathers consider day care a preferable option to parental care? Or are fathers' paychecks and career status more important than their children's need for a parental presence? Or are wives' wages so low in many cases that it does not "make sense" for the dad to stay home?

### Influence of the Workplace

I was disappointed in the data from the questionnaire on the subject of the influence of the workplace. Other studies rarely researched the influence of the workplace on parenting decisions so I was eager to gather data on this topic. The participants often chose not to answer questions in this section of the questionnaire. Whether it is because I did not ask the right questions, because the work histories of the SAHDs in the study were so varied, or because many fathers had not been in the formal work world for many years, I do not know. Of the ones who did complete this section of the questionnaire some reported that their work history encouraged them to become primary caregivers and others felt that it discouraged them. Though several of the dads in the interviews reported that the work world discourages parenting in general, they did not seem personally affected by this devaluing of parenting. Similarly, in the questionnaire many of the dads did not indicate that the workplace discouraged men from prioritizing their families. For example, most of the dads (14 of 17) replied "no" when asked whether or not informal norms existed in their former place of work that would have discouraged individuals from using "family friendly" programs such as parental leave. This supports the Swedish findings that even though the family friendly policies may exist, most men still do not take advantage of them (Haas & Hwang, 1995). I found the answers to questions about the workplace's support of fathers prioritizing families contradictory. The answers to specific questions about men using family leaves, and male coworkers'/managers' reactions to men using family leaves, indicate a workplace environment supportive of fathers' prioritizing families. However, answers to open-ended questions and comments in the interviews indicate the opposite. To

me this indicates an ambivalence about the influence of work on their parenting decisions, or at least a more complex picture in need of further research.

Parental leave is one component of the workplace and the fathers' use of parental leave may indicate that the work world is becoming more supportive of prioritizing parenting. I found it interesting that so few fathers from the study took a parental leave (only two). This phenomenon of very few fathers using parental leave reflects the Statistics Canada finding that since 1991 the percentage of fathers on leave out of all parents on leave has stayed near 3%–4% (Marshall, 1998, p. 12). Perhaps Canada's recent changes to extend parental leave came too late to be useful to the SAHDs in my study. Perhaps parental leave does not meet the needs of fathers. What would have to change, in addition to higher income replacement during parental leave, for more fathers to take a parental leave so that they can choose to be a full-time caregiver of their newborn children?

### **Experiences as a Stay-at-Home Father**

#### **Sharing the Housework**

Details of who is doing how much childcare and housework may seem trivial but they "reveal and foreshadow [...] dramatic social change" (Coltrane, 1996, p. 8). In the questionnaire findings are several of the participants' comments on how SAHDs and their wives decide to divide the housework. Most use a method of negotiation to figure out who is responsible for what tasks. The fathers in this study appear to do a higher percentage of the housework than most fathers. In her book The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home, Arlie Hochschild reports that only 20% of the men in her study of dual-income families in the U.S. shared house work equally (1989), while 74% of the fathers in my study report that they do half or more of the housework (65%). Studies



measuring the amount of housework performed by women and men show that Canadian and U.S. statistics are very similar (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). Granted, the SAHDs reported their own percentages, while Hochschild's participants were observed in their homelives and their wives' perspectives were taken into account on the amount of housework they took care of. Perhaps the fathers self-report that they do higher percentages of housework than their wives would report if asked. Studies show that husbands tend to overestimate their own involvement in house work and underestimate their wife's involvement (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). Nevertheless, I think it is safe to say that most of the SAHDs in this study do a higher percentage of the housework than the average father. The fact that 75% of SAHDs in this study do half or more of the housework is significantly higher than Hochschild's reported 20%. Do stay-at-home moms also take care of half of the housework or do they do more?

I thought it was interesting that the SAHDs reported doing less of the family organizing than housework. Why is this? The SAHDs vary widely in the amount of organizing they take responsibility for. Does this indicate that many fathers, even when they are SAHDs, still do less of the "thinking work" behind raising children and running a household? Susan Walzer (1998) called this mental energy so often disproportionately invested by mothers as "parental consciousness." Why do these full-time fathers seem to still take responsibility for less of the family organizing than the housework?

### Community Influence

To my knowledge, no other study researched stay-at-home fathers' influence on the community but I was surprised at the minor effect these SAHDs felt that they have had on the wider community. Since I view fathers in the primary caregiving role as so essential to

lasting societal gender equality and so important to changing society's stereotypes and values, it is difficult for me to understand why they do not see their role as being highly influential. Maybe the fathers were being modest in their responses, but I got the impression that most of them are not fathering full-time in order to bring about social change; they just want to do what they feel is best for their children. Maybe they do not realize the importance of their role because society does not affirm it. For example, four of the fathers had been asked to speak or write in public about their experiences as a SAHD, but these were minor public events such as speaking to a Sunday school class or a high school class. If fathers taking on the role of full-time caregivers is parallel to mothers taking on the role of full-time breadwinners, do the mothers equally influence social change or is one role seen as more influential than the other?

### Consequences of being a SAHD

I was not surprised at the reported consequences of being a SAHD. The dads in this study report the highs and lows of any parent who is engaged in the intense job of full-time parenting. Because the father as the primary caregiver is still seen as unusual or non-traditional, these fathers face a few unique bonuses and drawbacks. As was apparent from some of the interviewees comments and is supported by other research, fathers who take years away from the formal work world to raise their children may have a more difficult time re-entering the work force than mothers, because employers tend to view "time-off" for full-time parenting as more suspicious in men's work histories than women's (Helford, Frank, & Burroughs, 1997). SAHDs also estimate losing more income when they stay home than do stay-at-home mothers (Helford, Frank, & Burroughs, 1997; Lovy, 1998). Fathers at home may also face significant isolation as indicated in quotes from participants

in this study as well as other sources on SAHDs (Gill, 2001; Grbich, 1992; Zimmerman, 2000). Some of the unique bonuses full-time fathers report include raising children with less gender stereotypes, flexible time to work on personal projects, and the occasional exuberant praise and admiration from people who think that a SAHD is exceedingly special. Whether the bonuses and drawbacks are unique to being a male caretaker or not, it is a role with its highs and lows. I would not go as far as Gill (2001) to state that "[t]hey (SAHDs) wouldn't trade a minute of it!" (p. 21) but I do get the strong sense from the SAHDs in my study that they do not regret their decision to parent full-time and that it is or was worth the sacrifices.

#### Prefer Shared Parenting

Why did nearly half of the SAHDs indicate that they would or might prefer a different parenting arrangement? I do not think it is because of general dissatisfaction with their role as a full-time parent, because only one respondent articulated strong dissatisfaction with his role and his preference that his wife be at home full-time. It is possible that the fathers did not feel free to express dissatisfaction. On the other hand, the questionnaire was anonymous and elsewhere in their answers many fathers expressed deep satisfaction and commitment to their role as a primary caregiver. My theory is that the fathers view parenting as a role best shared. As many of them said in different ways, it is an intense and extremely important job, one best kept in balance with other things. Many also mentioned the fact that their spouses miss out on important times with their children as a reason why they prefer to share the parenting. The fact that 7 of the 19 SAHDs would prefer to share parenting more equally with their spouses raises many interesting questions. If this is what they would prefer then why do they not do it? I asked a couple of the

interviewees this question and they felt that the structures of the work world and the economy actively discouraged combining part-time work with part-time parenting. A living wage for part-time work is difficult to find and the lack of benefits and upward mobility in part-time jobs are two other significant barriers. What changes are needed in order to make a combination of shared income-earning and shared at-home parenting a viable option for spouses with young children? Why does this option not exist already?

### **Responses of Workplaces, Family Members, and Community Members**

When asked how people respond to their role as SAHDs, most participants gave examples of both negative and positive responses. I was surprised at the high level of positive responses the SAHDs indicated receiving. While some researchers did report positive responses (Grbich, 1992; Russell, 1983), often researchers reported more negative responses to SAHD's roles (Baruch & Barnett, 1981; Geiger, 1996; Grbich, 1992; Haas & Hwang, 1995; Harper, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000). SAHDs often reported hearing and sensing an interesting mix of admiration and even exuberant affirmation of their role while at the same time also hearing and sensing people questioning their competence as a breadwinner and wondering if they are parenting full-time because they could not "make it" in the world of paid work. Several dads in the study noted the high level of self-confidence that the role of full-time fathering takes in order to withstand the gender-stereotyped assumptions about and reactions to their role.

It comes as little surprise that the main source of support that most of the SAHDs report is their spouse. Zimmerman (2000) reported spouses as the main source of support for stay-at-home fathers as well. The second most often listed form of support in the questionnaire is family and the third is friends. One interview also affirmed the support of

the spouse as essential in remaining committed to prioritizing at-home parenting over wealth or material comforts that would demand a second income. I found it interesting that four fathers listed spirituality/faith as the second or first most important source of support. It is also interesting to note that in Zimmerman's research (2000), stay-at-home moms often cited religion as a reason for choosing their role while no stay-at-home dads mentioned religion as a reason. Does this indicate that religion is less important to SAHDs? Because different religious traditions emphasize or ignore the importance of financial stewardship and simple living, I wish I had asked more questions about the role of spirituality/faith in their decision-making and in their role as primary caregivers in order to understand how they live with the pressures of consumerism.

### **Structural Barriers**

What stands out in my mind when I think about the findings of this study is the unexpected twist the study took after analyzing the questionnaire responses. I realized that I could not narrowly focus on the way society encourages or discourages fathers to become or remain SAHDs, when some of the most significant barriers society puts in their way are the same barriers society puts before all parents, regardless of gender. A significant barrier is the way society devalues parenting. However, though both mothers and fathers suffer from this devaluing of parenting, the root cause of this lack of respect is still very gendered: The sexism of our patriarchal society continues to devalue women's contributions and traditional women's work (such as parenting), while rewarding and affirming the traditional masculine sphere of paid work (Calasanti & Bailey, 1991; Hartstock, 1998; E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999; Waring, 1988). We need to remember that parenting has been and is still viewed as primarily women's work. As long as this segregation continues, parenting will

reinforce gender inequality. In her book on gender transitions into parenthood, Walzer (1998) states that "parenting arrangements are linked not only to the social construction of gender difference, but to gender inequality as well" (p. 14).

Another significant barrier directly related to society's devaluing of parenting is: society's emphasis on consumerism. The fathers in this study emphasized both of these barriers as strong themes. A third barrier, less emphasized by the fathers but still significant and directly related to the first two barriers is the continuing wage disparity between men and women. This disparity is a result of society's devaluing of parenting and traditional women's work as well as gender discrimination, but it is also the cause of some of the financial pressures discouraging fathers from parenting full-time. Men are seen as better at earning money so they are pressured to prioritize earning money. I briefly discuss the barriers of societal devaluation of parenting, consumerism, and the wage disparity in the following sections.

### Valuing Parenting

I was shocked at the lack of articles or books on the subject of the societal valuing of parenting. Besides cultural feminists' critique of the devaluation of parenting, academics generally ignore the issue (Gilligan, 1982; Unger & Crawford, 1996). Numerous people have studied and written about parents' values and how they affect parenting behaviours and their children or how parents teach values to children (Cantor & Nathanson, 2001; Garbarino, 2001; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993; Okagaki & Divecha, 1993), but there is little discussion of the broader societal values toward parents and parenting. This lack of research and discussion of society's valuing of parenting exists both in psychology and beyond. Isaac Prilleltensky (2001), a community psychologist, points out the lack of

analysis of general societal values in research and understanding in community psychology, but instead of using the term "values" (as he does in other articles) he refers to "cultural and political norms," which are very closely related to values. "I think we are clear on how personal, family, work, and school contexts influence basic human needs, but I am not sure we have yet understood clearly the role of cultural and political norms in wellness" (p. 768). Cultural and political norms, or values, shape our everyday lives and influence our wellness including our priorities and decision-making around parenting.

Whether we understand societal values or not, they influence every aspect of our lives, including our parenting choices and how we feel about these choices. The fathers in this study clearly named the devaluing of parenting, childcare, and the work of the home as a significant barrier that discourages fathers from being full-time caregivers of their children:

*If we truly valued childhood and parenting, then we would be motivated to find the most appropriate legal and economic mechanisms that would allow parents to choose to spend more time with their children.*

*I believe that prevalent values and expectations are essentially patriarchal.*

*I really believe that the importance of parenting is diminished. And overall I don't think parents are aware of the different parenting models - the various options that they can pursue. We're such a consumer-oriented society and I think that has priority over the role of parents. Having money doesn't necessarily mean that you're a good parent.*

*Financial pressures are often really social pressures. Work of the home is not valued.*

Why does our society devalue parenting? Our patriarchal society has traditionally ignored and continues to ignore women's work and women's contributions (Hartstock, 1998; E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999; Waring, 1988). Because patriarchy views the care of children as "women's work," this work has gone un-paid and is undervalued (Calasanti &

Bailey, 1991; Waring, 1988). Our patriarchal society's chronic devaluing of housework (also traditionally women's work) adds to the devaluation of full-time parenting because this role usually entails a significant amount of housework (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). Men especially receive little social and public support as they learn the skills of and carry out domestic work. The fathers in my study emphasized the need to value child care and housework again in the following responses to the question, "What things do you feel need to be changed in society to encourage fathers to choose the role of primary caregiver?"

*Increased societal value on homecare.*

*Cultural affirmation of parental care of children.*

*More education to the general population and the values [parenting] offers.*

Clearly, these SAHDs do not feel that their role as a parent is valued. Why is parenting not honoured and respected? From this study, I am convinced that along with being "women's work" another reason our society does not value parenting is because the valuing of financial success and status (consumerism) supercedes or crowds out our desire to value parenting. Prioritizing parenting and prioritizing wealth and status (i.e., consumerism) are often in tension and even contradictory. To uphold and commit to one often means the inability to pursue the other. Further, society's prioritizing of one value over the other is very gender-influenced as we can see in the way that society values and affirms activities involved in pursuing financial success and status, which are traditional "men's work" and men's spheres.

### Consumerism

One of the first things to alert me to the fact that consumerism may be an important issue for SAHDs was a comment by one of the dads that: "Financial pressures are often



really social pressures." In other words, financial pressures are not usually based on needs but on socially constructed desires. I had hoped to conclude from the questionnaire responses whether social or financial pressures were more discouraging of SAHDs' role as full-time parents but because about equal numbers of respondents named social or financial pressures and many named both, I realized that the social and financial were inextricably intertwined. What is this combination of financial and social pressures called?

Consumerism. I could call it "capitalist patriarchy," because capitalism and patriarchy have both played major roles in encouraging and sustaining consumerism, but for the purposes of this thesis I will call this combination of social and financial pressures consumerism.

Interestingly, studies on SAHDs and parenting rarely discuss consumerism as a barrier to fathers choosing to be full-time caregivers. Despite the lack of discussion of consumerism, many of the fathers who participated in my study clearly experienced society's valuing of consumerism over parenting as a very real barrier. The fathers gave examples of how devaluation of parenting manifests itself in people's negative comments to them in which people pressure the fathers to prioritize paid work over parenting.

*My wife's parents were and still are quite upset and keep asking when I am going to get a job, hire a nanny and keep their daughter in the style which they think she deserves and expects.*

*[I was] berated and told many times that you can't compare staying at home with your kids to getting up and going to work every day.*

*[People are often] wondering how we will "make it" financially when I gave up a good job.*

These kinds of comments demonstrate people's acceptance of society's valuing of paid work over parenting, especially for fathers.

In the interviews, all of the fathers named the pressures to accumulate wealth and material goods as barriers they struggle with as they try to prioritize being at-home full-time to parent their children. These families clearly feel that their children benefit most from an at-home parent and so they make the sacrifices needed in order to make this arrangement possible for their families. Others argue that children benefit most from the higher income of both parents working outside the home by decreasing the stress of economic hardship (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Regardless of which family arrangement is most beneficial to the children and parents, I am arguing that families need to be able to choose what works best for them. In particular, I believe that families need the freedom to choose the father as the full-time at-home parent.

Though I did not find literature or studies on SAHDs that discussed the influence of consumerism on parenting, the research I found most relevant to the issues arising from my study was conducted by a Canadian researcher also in southwestern Ontario. Anne Dienhart (1998) wrote an insightful book on her research of the role of fathers in families committed to shared parenting entitled Reshaping Fatherhood: The Social Construction of Shared Parenting. Based at the University of Guelph, her interviews with 18 couples provides another perspective on families in a geographical area similar to my study. She focused on styles of shared parenting, motivations for sharing, and the complex and changing roles of fathers and mothers. Though she did not include societal values or consumerism in her list of obstacles to shared parenting, she did name the inflexibility of institutional structures and cultural expectations of gender as obstacles (1998). The part of her book most relevant to my study is the last chapter where she shared her reflexive comments on her research. Here she named the valuing of family work as one area of

"gender politics" and pointed out that the couples in her study prioritize their commitment to family and parenting above all else, even finances. She saw these couples as challenging society's assumptions of how people are to make financial decisions and as intentionally choosing family commitments over materialism. Dienhart explained that, "rather than operating from a principle of making decisions to maximize family income, these people seem to see financial considerations as part of the larger decision matrix" (p. 195).

However, although she named materialism, she did not discuss it in any detail, nor did she discuss the broader economic structures influencing materialism.

Similarly, the author of a guidebook for SAHDs does not name consumerism as a barrier to fathers becoming primary caregivers but supports this conclusion by devoting a whole chapter to "How to make it on one income, and other minor miracles" (Gill, 2001). In Stay-At-Home Dads: The Essential Guide to Creating the New Family, Libby Gill (2001) does not study SAHDs but rather provides practical advice on how to create and sustain this kind of parenting arrangement. As the mother in a family with a stay-at-home father, her perspective is an important and experienced one worth citing despite the fact that her book would not be considered scholarly work. In this chapter she points out the hidden costs of both parents working and recommends downsizing. Though she does not mention the word "values," she is quick to name attitudes about downsizing as something to keep in check:

If you're stuck in "we're depriving ourselves" mode, you'll sabotage yourselves before you've even started. Instead, think of downsizing as healthy change that will promote what is most beneficial to your family, especially those kids you love more than anything in the world. (Gill, 2001, p. 63)

She recommends taking actions very contrary to consumerism such as looking at what one has which one can live without and getting rid of it -- for at least a few years. She also

recommends buying used cars rather than new ones, sending children to public schools rather than private schools, and not using credit cards except for emergencies. She describes families with a SAHD as having made "a conscious choice to downsize, prioritize, and restructure so they can live on one income, get off the fast track, and, most definitely, give up keeping up with the Joneses" (p. 21). Gill misses an opportunity to discuss societal values when she names the desire to keep up with the Joneses without questioning or critiquing that desire, where it comes from, or the consequences of that desire.

In a similar way, the SAHDs and others who wrote the book At-Home Dad Handbook confirm the importance of financial re-prioritizing in their book without critiquing societal structures or values for requiring financial re-prioritizing in the first place (Cooper, 1998). The issue of choosing between two conflicting values is named but it is not discussed or critiqued. The following comment by the authors indicates that the core tension in at-home parenting is deciding between the value of a paycheck and the value of staying home with your children. "After reading the handbook you'll have a better understanding of why we feel staying home with our children is more valuable than any paycheck" (Cooper, 1998). Again, they give practical advice on how to live on one income and how to choose raising children over working away from home, but this decision is not analyzed or critiqued.

Even though societal values around parenting and values of consumerism are not being discussed, they are still important. Inasmuch as these are significant barriers to fathers choosing to be primary caregivers, it is important to consider their consequences. Can families living on low incomes even consider the option of having a SAHD? The

findings of this study indicate that our society discourages full-time parenting and yet does not provide affordable or regulated childcare. What does this lack of affirmation and practical support mean for the well-being of parents, children, and families?

### The Gendered Wage Disparity

Another consequence of these imbalanced and sexist societal values is the persistent wage disparity between female and male workers (Brannon, 1999). Though it was not mentioned enough in the data of my study to be considered a strong theme, I believe that the wage gap between men and women acts as another significant barrier to fathers choosing to stay at home to parent. In 1991 wives' wages (with husbands under 40 years old) were still on average only 33% of the total family incomes in Canada (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999, p. 262). A study in 1993 gave another example of this wage gap when the researchers found that female university graduates' full-time earnings were on average only 75% that of male university graduates (E.D. Nelson & Robinson, 1999). Perhaps the fathers participating in my study did not mention wage disparity as a barrier, because many of their wives earn more than they had when they were working. The fathers often cited their wives' higher incomes as a reason the fathers decided to leave their paid work and parent full-time. If my study had included fathers who chose *not* to parent full-time, the barrier of wage disparity and the inability to survive on the wives' salaries may have been a stronger theme. Others have noted the significance of the wage gap as a barrier to alternative or shared parenting arrangements (Coltrane, 1996). Coltrane predicts that the wage gap will remain with men earning more than women and it will limit us to only modest changes in shared parenting.

### **SECTION 3: NEEDS - WHAT IS MISSING?**

I must clearly identify the problems discouraging fathers from adopting the role of primary caregiver so that I can move to the next phase of the praxis cycle where I suggest taking action in order to create social change. In this section I summarize the needs and problems identified by the full-time fathers and I add needs and problems identified by others, including myself. Referring back to Prilleltensky's (2001) Praxis Framework (Table 1) we can see that at this part of the praxis cycle we ask, "What is missing and what is desired?" (p. 762). In this section I look at what is missing and what is desired in society by dividing it into the more manageable areas of media, government, and the work world.

#### ***Societal values***

It is tempting to conclude that we, as a society, just need to value stay-at-home fathers more and everything will be okay. But more television commercials of handsome bare-chested men holding chubby naked babies will not do the trick. To acknowledge the need for valuing SAHDs without also acknowledging the broader societal pressures actively *de-valuing* parenting, and even the very act of caring (all things traditionally associated with women/parenting), would be irresponsible and lacking in integrity. The issue is, to put it simply, a matter of priorities. Somehow making money and economic growth have superceded all else in importance in Western capitalist, male-dominated society. Parenting and caring for children in general do not generate much money; therefore, they are lower on society's list of priorities. The items higher on the list of priorities (such as globalization, industry, and technology) receive funding, promotion, tax incentives, and status. Despite the existence of people who reject the societally imposed priorities and continue to value children and parenting -- as seen in these SAHDs -- why is

it that so many of us have gone along with this trend? Skolnick (1997) confronts this issue by asking, "Have individuals in recent years become more self-centred, less willing to make commitments or to invest in family ties?" (p. 167).

What is missing? Societal respect for the work of parenting is missing. The goals of the industrial era such as material progress, conspicuous consumption, identity created by material possessions and social position (Elgin, 1981) are not compatible with the goals and values of involved parenting. For a brief summary of these conflicting priorities see the table below.

**Table 5: Priorities of Society vs. At-Home Parents**

<b>Society's Priorities</b>	<b>At-home Parents' Priorities</b>
Individualism asks: "What is best for me?"	Collectivism asks: "What is best for the whole family?"
Material wealth	Wealth of family relationships
Social status	Love of spouse and children
Career upward mobility	Healthy development of their children
Constant growth and expansion of finances	Being thrifty

The fathers in this study clearly expressed this tension between the values of consumerism and their own parenting values. They clearly felt the lack of value for their role and noted the need for respect and status for full-time caregivers.

A problem in specific relation to fathers who are primary caregivers is the fact that in Western industrial society "proof of 'manhood' has often been equated with the ability to succeed in the material world" (Elgin, 1981, p. 76). SAHDs are often even less respected than full-time mothers (indeed, there are elements in society that encourage full-time motherhood) because society has greater expectations of men than women to succeed in a career and earn a generous income. The problem is the equation of manhood with a man's

career and material success. A similar problem is the lingering attitude that mothering is "ongoing care and nurturing for children," while fathering is only "an initial sex act and financial obligations to pay" (Coltrane, 1996, p. 4). This view of fathering places too much parental responsibility on mothers and demands of them too much self-sacrificing. A problematic side effect of this perspective is that men's parenting is even valued less than women's, because the stereotype prevails that men "babysit" their own children and do household chores under the direction of the wife (Chodorow, 1978).

### **Media**

Several fathers in this study indicate that the problem with the media is that they continue to show fathers as incompetent. Coltrane (1996) concludes that the media's images lag behind reality in the way that they still show dad as bumbling and "comically inept" (p. 206). In addition, in the interviews two of fathers asserted that the media devalue parenting in general by painting unrealistic and often unattainable pictures of family life. They indicated that the media's emphasis on parents' need to accumulate material goods and give their children material goods also devalues the act of parenting by diminishing parents to entertainment providers.

### **Government**

Though the SAHDs in the study did not know the statistics of government support, many of them expressed the need for more governmental support of parenting. These fathers' expectations that the government support parents of young children is not unrealistic or unheard of as other countries already provide this support. European parents receive more government help than Canadian parents. In fact, "Canada is second only to



the United States in its ambivalence toward parents with young children" (Peters et al., 2001, p. 219). The fathers named the problems of insufficient parental leave income replacement for fathers (only a maximum of \$413/week is provided for a maximum of 35 weeks), lack of benefits for self-employed parents, and the need for tax breaks for at-home parents.

### **The World of Paid Work**

The problems in the work world are similar to the problem with society's prioritization of money-making over most everything else, including parenting. Here in the work world is where we see men's identities irrationally tied to their incomes. All too often men's income is seen to equal their "masculine competency, potency, and social status" (Elgin, 1981, p. 77). Another problem is how the sexual division of labor with women as childcarers generates male dominance and therefore sexual inequality in our society (Chodorow, 1978). If parenting were more valued and even financially compensated this power imbalance might not happen, but the way society is structured right now it seems an unfortunate reality. A problem that the SAHDs often mentioned is the inflexibility of the present work world and the lack of viable part-time work. Inflexibility and lack of options creates a problem of lack of balance in parents' lives as one of them is forced to work full-time while the other one is home full-time with the children.

## **SECTION 4: PRAGMATIC - WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

Now that I have articulated the philosophical ideal, looked at the context to determine what exists, and summarized the problems and needs, it is time to take the next step of this praxis: action. This is the pragmatic step where I synthesize what I have learned from the questionnaires and interviews as well as the literature and suggest action and changes in order to lessen the barriers hindering fathers from choosing to be full-time dads. The challenge is to be creative and bold in this problem-solving and yet to suggest realistic social improvements. As Prilleltensky put it, my job as an agent of change is to "strive to promote wellness by combining values with knowledge of what people want, need, and regard important in life" (2001, p. 766). I examine at what is needed in the four areas Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified as part of his ecological model: individual level, microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. I employ the ecological model in order to look at the ways social change can happen at different levels of our environment. These levels all interact with each other and influence one another.

### **Individual Level - *The SAHD or the Parent***

Of all the areas needing social change, I think that the areas of microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem need more attention and intervention than an individual SAHD or parent. The problems outlined in the previous "Needs" section are not individual problems but wider societal problems. Still, it is worth looking at what an individual SAHD can do because parents can "select and shape their environments" as well as be shaped by their environment (Luster & Okagaki, 1998, p. 245). The most powerful action that a SAHD (or any parent) can take is to critique his own values, gender role, parenting role, and priorities and change these aspects of his life to fit with his chosen goals and

values. Contemporary fatherhood means "reordering priorities and making a commitment to physically and emotionally care for children" (Coltrane, 1996, p. 5). Of course, individual parents are involved and need to take action in all the different ecological areas (for e.g., challenging the sexism of the education system, lobbying the government for policy changes, or changing his attitudes), but I think that our energies are better spent focussing on transforming the larger social barriers such as societal values and economic institutions.

### **Microsystem - *Spouses, Family, Extended Family***

Marriage partners and families can influence social change through many personal decisions about lifestyle and priorities. One SAHD gave practical advice on how to prioritize at-home parenting despite society's pressures to do otherwise. He talked about making "key decisions" in line with one's values and being careful about "getting into a groove" that requires a higher income and, consequently, two incomes, thereby losing the option of an at-home parent.

What can spouses and family do to make the option of SAHDs more feasible? They can respect a father's desire and need to nurture and care for his child, acknowledge the importance of fathering, and encourage and support parents in doing what they feel is best for their children regardless of prescribed gender roles. The following table lists actions that could help bring about positive social change by promoting parental wellness more generally and by providing parenting options (see Table 7). In the areas titled "parents" and "extended family" are some ideas regarding how social change can happen at this level of the microsystem.

**Exosystem - *Education System, Medical System, Economy, Government, the Workplace, Professionals, Spiritual/faith Community, Media***

The exosystem is a huge area of society with great potential for enormous social change. The various systems and institutions in the exosystem can stop discouraging and begin encouraging fathers to be involved parents (and SAHDs) in many ways: Hospitals and schools can treat the father as just an important decision-maker in an infant's or child's life as the mother; the workplace can respect and promote fathers' using family days and parental leave; the spiritual/faith communities can affirm fathering as much as they do mothering; and professionals and community workers can provide programs for fathers and children. The media can show men in competent nurturing roles and include discussion of real issues and challenges parents face like balancing desire for wealth with desire for time with family.

Many social changes needed to encourage fathers to consider parenting full-time are the same changes needed to support and encourage parenting in general. In the remaining sections of Table 7 you are ideas for actions at the level of the exosystem. These areas of society influence our personal choices in many visible and invisible ways. It is easy to focus on personal choices and personal problems as the area to focus our efforts for change, but it is important to understand that the wider societal structures directly influence our personal decisions. Wachtel (1983) explains the importance of seeing this connection between the personal limitations or problems and the wider societal structures:

"Understanding how our present choices are self-defeating is a crucial step in the process of change, but so too is understanding how the social and political context makes such self-defeating choices seem almost inevitable" (p. xiii). By taking some or all of the actions listed in Table 7 we will influence significant social change. Will this social change all be

positive? Perhaps not; but it will mean more options for fathers and parents. Coltrane (1996) argues that these changes may be the key to gender equality. "The family changes we are facing will be neither easy nor uniformly positive, but they do carry the potential of richer lives for men, more choices for women, and more gender equality for future generations" (pp. 4-5).

### **Macrosystem - *Attitudes Toward Children, Parenting, Work, and Money***

How do we act in order to change something as huge and pervasive as societal attitudes toward fathers, parenting, work, and money? All of the actions listed for the previous areas will influence and change societal attitudes in these areas. Can we force structural change or attitude change through legislation? I believe yes, but some believe not: "Durable social structures, including stable families, cannot be legislated into existence. They derive their strength from people's habits, customs, and social ethics..." (Eberly, 1999, p. 262). Even if we do not believe that we can legislate societal change, we can encourage questioning and critiquing of accepted social norms and accepted "realities." We can also personally struggle to live out our values in our parenting choices. If we are open about our parenting struggles and decision-making and share these experiences with those around us in personal and public ways, we make ourselves more vulnerable, but we also spark much needed conversations that prompt thinking about parenting values and parenting priorities. Feminism contributes to our effort to change attitudes about parenting and consumerism by encouraging people to explore alternative ways of living, including the idea of living simply (Elgin, 1981). Women are often role models in this effort to find alternative ways of living and women's liberation from gender-role stereotypes can equal men's liberation.

The actions we can take to promote the role of the SAHD as a viable option are varied and numerous. We can choose to act as individuals or institutions, in our personal lives or professional lives, in formal or informal ways, or in a combination of the above. If I could choose one strategy to promote the option of fathers staying at home full-time, I would lobby for a national policy that provides income replacement for a 24-month guaranteed child-raising (distinct from the parental leave at the time of birth) leave for fathers and mothers with at least one child under the age of five. I would like to see this policy widely publicized and employers required to provide pamphlets and information sessions on the new policy. Regardless of how we take action, there is no reason to resign ourselves to the way the present situation discourages parents, particularly fathers, from prioritizing parenting.

Table 6

### Actions to Promote Parenting Options

Change Agents	Sample of Value-Driven Actions to Promote Parenting Options
<b>Parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If possible, live thriftily so that your family can survive on one income (don't try to keep up with the Joneses).</li> <li>• Make key decisions about housing and transportation that allow you to live on one income.</li> <li>• Ask for financial and physical help from friends and family so that you can be with your children full-time if that is what you want.</li> <li>• Surround yourself with peers who hold similar values and support each other in your commitments.</li> <li>• Advocate at your workplace for more flexibility and benefits for parents of young children.</li> <li>• Share parenting between mother and father as equally as possible.</li> <li>• Critique consumerism and seek alternative fulfillment through spirituality, relationships, and rootedness.</li> </ul>
<b>Extended family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affirm parents in their parenting role.</li> <li>• Support parents by providing childcare, sharing resources such as vehicles and equipment, and respecting their priorities.</li> <li>• Encourage children and grandchildren to question society's emphasis on buying and accumulating things.</li> <li>• Model simple living by creating fun family events that are affordable or free.</li> </ul>
<b>School personnel</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assume that the father is just as involved in parenting as the mother.</li> <li>• Welcome and encourage both parents' involvement in their children's</li> </ul>

	<p>school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer adult classes and provide on-site childcare.</li> <li>• Teach students the importance of parenting.</li> <li>• Empower students with the skills to critique and create public policy.</li> <li>• Provide education credit for at-home parents (Hewlett, 2001).</li> </ul>
<b>Professionals and community helpers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect and affirm parents in their role as caregivers.</li> <li>• Provide free community programs for parents and children.</li> <li>• Provide programs specifically for fathers and children.</li> <li>• Provide programs teaching and promoting simple living.</li> <li>• Provide affordable family counseling</li> </ul>
<b>Artists, journalists, and media workers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforce in the media the benefits and importance of parenting.</li> <li>• Produce shows that depict involved, committed and competent fathers caring for their children.</li> <li>• Make parenting issues a national priority.</li> <li>• Reduce the glorifying of consumerism in T.V. shows, music videos, magazines, movies, and commercials.</li> <li>• Critique norms of consumerism and promote valuing relationships instead.</li> <li>• Clarify for public the role of social justice in promoting involved parenting.</li> </ul>
<b>Policymakers and child advocates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a national office to promote parenting options and family wellness.</li> <li>• Promote and fund educational opportunities.</li> <li>• Reduce the allowed number of commercials promoting consumerism.</li> <li>• Provide tax breaks and incentives for at-home parents.</li> <li>• Reverse a current trend of eliminating public services. (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 163)</li> <li>• Distribute social resources not just on the basis of merit but also on the basis of need. (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 163)</li> <li>• Promote and fund educational opportunities for parents. (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 163)</li> <li>• Outlaw wage disparity between women and men.</li> <li>• Discourage over-time work.</li> <li>• Implement employment policies requiring the creation of part-time jobs with upward mobility.</li> <li>• Promote a more generous parental leave.</li> </ul>
<b>Government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guarantee a living wage for full-time workers.</li> <li>• Eliminate sales taxes on children's necessities (Hewlett, 2001).</li> <li>• Provide low-interest loans and allow low downpayments for families trying to buy a house.</li> <li>• Provide a family allowance for families with children under 6 (Hewlett, 2001).</li> <li>• Make election days national holidays to encourage parents to vote (Hewlett, 2001).</li> <li>• Extend the school day and year to be more compatible with parents' work schedules (Hewlett, 2001).</li> <li>• Increase funding for early childhood education.</li> <li>• Raise the income of childcare workers (Hewlett, 2001).</li> <li>• Implement a national childcare program.</li> <li>• Pass anti-child-poverty legislation.</li> <li>• Support families who want home-care or outside childcare (Peters et al, 2001, p. 219).</li> </ul>
<b>Economists and business people</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide part-time jobs with upward mobility.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect and affirm parents for their parenting role.</li> <li>• Encourage fathers and mothers to use the benefits available to them.</li> <li>• Top up the federally provided parental leave.</li> <li>• Offer low-interest loans to young families.</li> </ul>
<b>Spiritual/Faith community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critique society's values and encourage others to critique society's values.</li> <li>• Provide alternative values.</li> <li>• Advocate for policy changes supporting parents.</li> <li>• Teach philosophies needed for alternative lifestyles.</li> <li>• Pray that fathers realize the value of and prioritize parenting.</li> <li>• Encourage parents to seek help and depend on others.</li> <li>• Advocate for social justice rather than temporary fix-it solutions.</li> <li>• Provide affordable family counseling.</li> </ul>

### ***Where I Started From and Where Future Research Could Go***

In hindsight, the most interesting part of this research process for me was when the direction of inquiry shifted in order to focus on questions about structural barriers such as societal values. After reading through and coding the responses from the questionnaires, a few comments continued to nag at my mind. One of these was a response to the question: "What things do you feel need to be changed in society to encourage more fathers to choose the role of primary caregiver?" One dad wrote:

*I don't think that fathers should be the primary caregiver, any more than I think mothers should be the primary caregiver. As a society, we need to start respecting parenting enough to allow both parents to have a positive, meaningful role in child rearing.*

At first I felt somewhat defensive at the critique of my question ("My intention was not to rally all men to be SAHDs!"), but when I got past my defensiveness I was able to see that maybe I was missing seeing important barriers by not recognizing the structural barriers discouraging full-time parenting in general. Other comments supported the suspicion that I needed to also address the structural issues concerning the devaluing of parenting. Most of these comments came at the end of the questionnaire where I had invited participants to



include anything else they thought that I should know. The following three comments are from that section of the questionnaire.

*There are many questions here that don't really apply to me. I feel fortunate to be married to [my wife]; we have made a conscious effort to share our lives emotionally, financially, with children, etc. I do not consider myself a stay-at-home father, more of an interested, equal partner in contributing to a good life, together.*

*I hate being called a "stay-at-home dad". I hate "Dr. Mom" TV commercials and all other sexist ads. I hate laws that presume that the mother is the natural and deserving parent. I hate Toys R' Us pink and blue colour schemes. Why must society pigeonhole people?*

*I think many rural stay-at-home dads would never admit to the role. So you may miss many dads who are effectively stay-at-home dads but don't describe themselves as such.*

What does it mean that some of the participants do not identify themselves as SAHDs? Are these comments merely conveying reluctance to accept the negative stereotypes that may go along with that title, or is it something else? The fact that at least two of the dads said very clearly, "I am a *parent* and the issues I face as a parent are more important than things that may come up because I am a *male* parent," (my paraphrasing) seemed important to me. So I revised the interview guide to include questions about society's values around parenting in general and not just society's responses to SAHDs' parenting. I also researched and reviewed literature on society's valuing of parenting -- something I had not done before. The interviews that were guided by this revised interview guide and focussed on society's values about parenting proved to be very rich, and I felt like I had done the right thing to shift directions.

Future research on the topic of barriers to SAHDs or full-time parenting in general would benefit from an extensive review of the literature on the connections between societal values and parenting. The lack of discussion or study of this connection was

apparent even from my brief review of this literature. Authors address the topic of values and parenting but they often focus on the impact of the values on the children rather than the parents (Cantor & Nathanson, 2001; Garbarino, 2001). Despite the lack of discussion or research on the connections between society's values and parenting, I know that these connections are important. My confidence in the importance of these connections comes from knowing that the SAHDs in my study clearly indicated that many of them feel devalued in their parenting role as well as from a few authors (Bumpass, 2001), including cultural feminists (Gilligan, 1982; Unger & Crawford, 1996), who point out the problems resulting from a "parent-hurting society" (Hewlett, 2001, p. 265).

A second unexpected result arising from the value-focussed interviews was the very strong theme of consumerism as a significant barrier to parenting. I have been trying to determine if I contributed to this theme emerging from the data because it is a topic that I am personally interested in. I had a hunch that this was a significant barrier, but I did not ask specific questions about consumerism (see the revised interview guide, Appendix D) unless the father raised the subject and then I probed the topic further. One possible way I did influence the direction of the interviews toward consumerism was in an e-mail correspondence with each father (see Appendix F). In this correspondence I confirmed interview times for the next week. In addition I included the paragraph telling the fathers that the direction of the study was shifting as a result of the questionnaire responses and that I would be asking them questions about parenting in general in addition to questions about being a SAHD. One sentence in this correspondence may have influenced the fathers to think about consumerism when I commented on choosing between getting rich and prioritizing the well-being of one's children:

*So this means that I can't just focus narrowly on the barriers and encouragements to SAHDs since their issues are basically the same as anyone trying to prioritize family and the well-being of their children over getting rich or achieving success in the career world. (Bailey-Dick, e-mail correspondence, January 2, 2002).*

Besides this sentence I do not believe that I overtly influenced the emergence of this theme of consumerism as a barrier. I reviewed the literature I had already gathered on SAHDs and parenting for a discussion of this theme and when I found little mention of it I did a quick review of consumerism in other literature. I include references to some of this literature as part of the argument for why more research is needed into the connections between consumerism and societal values and parenting.

Again I was surprised at the lack of discussion of consumerism in scholarly books or articles and the lack of analysis of how it affects parenting or family life. I could not find any community psychology articles or books on this subject. In his article on community economic development, Ed Bennett (1992) mentions studies linking macroeconomic conditions and psychosocial dysfunctions but the article does not focus on how the economy or economic values influence parents or families. Similarly, in Janet Cahill's (1983) article entitled "*Structural characteristics of the macroeconomy and mental health: Implications for primary prevention research*" the focus is not on parents or families; the author does not even mention housework or parenting as part of the economy. Though Cahill does not discuss the connection between economic values (one being consumerism) and parenting, she makes the strong argument that psychologists should be more questioning and challenging of societal structures such as the economy. "If basic elements of our economy may be pathogenic," which she argues that they are, then "there is an obvious need to explore alternative economic models" and she challenges psychologists to ask more structural questions so that we can implement more structural interventions (p.

566). I believe that future research needs to investigate the structural question: What are the costs of consumerism to parental and family well-being?

Because community psychology has not researched or discussed this area, I had to look outside the field where I found relevant literature despite the apparent lack of attention to this topic in most fields. David Wells' (1998) Consumerism and the Movement of Housewives into Wage Work: The Interaction of Patriarchy, Class and Capitalism in the Twentieth Century America provides a "theoretical grounding of consumption behavior" (p. 47) that integrates consumerism, capitalism, and patriarchy. With arguments very similar to the ones Friedrich Engels made nearly a hundred years ago, Wells explains how capitalism and consumerism developed when workers lost control of their leisure time and material goods became the replacement. Wells' discussion of consumerism is particularly relevant to this study of SAHDs and parenting in so much that he looks at it in relation to housewives entering the formal work world. Housewives' work is very similar to the work of SAHDs. Therefore, we can see similarities in how the two populations behave and are valued by society. We could conclude from his arguments that it is especially difficult for fathers to leave the work force to work at home as full-time parents, because the capitalist values of spending and accumulating are more revered than the values of raising children full-time and running an efficient household.

Another author, Paul Wachtel (1983), argues from a psychological standpoint that the quest for economic growth and wealth (consumerism) is a result of a delusion of poverty in middle-class North Americans who never feel that they have enough, as well as an attempt to create security in the midst of rapid anxiety-producing change. Future research into the connections between parenting and consumerism must include literature

such as this from Wells, Engels, and Wachtel in order to understand how consumerism has become such a strong value and influence in our society and to critique the societal structures that shape our values and influence how we prioritize family, work, and income-earning.

Why have other researchers not looked at consumerism as a barrier to fathers being the primary caregiver? Maybe it is because we assume that the economy is beyond critique or we think the economy is "objective" or value-less or beyond reproach. Maybe it is because people see questioning consumerism as questioning the status quo (capitalism) and they are afraid of the consequences of being seen as "anti-capitalism" or as self-righteous or anti-progress. Whatever the reasons, we need further research to help us understand the connections between societal values, including consumerism, and parenting.

Future research in this area of fathers as full-time caregivers could be fascinating. Not only could the previously discussed topics of societal values and parenting prove rich ground for research, but the topic of male identity and how it influences fathers' parenting choices is another important area of research. Whether future research includes all of these topics or not, I would emphasize the need to include the spouses in the study. A couple of fathers clearly indicated in the questionnaire that they thought their spouse should have been given a similar questionnaire because they are a parenting *team*. Not only are a couple's motivations for choosing a parenting arrangement intertwined, but the barriers that they face in their parenting roles are often gendered and therefore at least indirectly related to the spouse or the spouse's role.

If I were to continue researching this area I would broaden the topic to shared parenting rather than just full-time fathers. I would include full-time fathers in the sample,

but I think that a less strict definition of the parenting arrangement would allow a more diverse and rich number of families to participate. I also believe that it is important to include in future research parents who both work outside the home (i.e., dual-earner families) to understand why they choose that priority rather than full-time parenting. A significant limitation of this study is the fact that I only heard from fathers who have managed to prioritize parenting and have not heard from fathers who want to prioritize parenting but feel that they cannot. Another limitation of the study is the small sample size. Future research could collect many more questionnaires or conduct more interviews if the researcher has 9-12 months within which to collect data.

Furthermore, in future research I would include questions about ethnicity and religion and ask participants how their ethnicity and/or religion affects their parenting choices. I am interested in how parents find the strength to go against the norms of society in their commitment to prioritize parenting and challenge gender stereotypes. I would like to ask parents where their strength comes from by asking questions about their faith, spirituality, and social/emotional support.

### ***Concluding Comments***

Through this research I have found that full-time fathers face unique barriers to choosing the role of primary caregiver because of their gender. Two significant barriers, the structural and value-laden barriers of consumerism and the devaluation of parenting, appear to discourage all parents in our consumeristic and career-focussed society from prioritizing parenting over career success and/or the accumulation of material goods. But fathers face additional barriers to full-time parenting in a patriarchal society that still pressures men to prioritize success in highly esteemed paid work, while devaluing

"traditional" women's work of parenting and housekeeping. Together, this lack of value for the work of parenting and the overvaluing of consumerism create powerful social and financial pressures pushing fathers into prioritizing career success and material accumulation rather than prioritizing parenting.

In this thesis I endeavor to show the reader how society's devaluing of parenting is inextricably connected to society's emphasis on material wealth (consumerism). I propose that the devaluing of parenting is a direct result of our patriarchal society's devaluing of women and women's work. Hewlett (2001) points out this connection between the value of parenting and consumerism. Her context is the United States but I believe, unfortunately, that her message is just as applicable to Canada.

What really counts in America is how much you get paid and what you can buy. Small wonder then that parenting is a dying art. Small wonder then that parents have less and less time for their children. And time is, of course, at the heart of the childrearing enterprise. Being a good parent requires providing a child with gifts of love, attention, energy, and resources, generously and unstintingly over a long period of time. It involves nourishing a small body, but it also involves growing a child's soul - sharing the stories and rituals that awaken a child's spirit and nurturing the spiritual bonds that create meaning and morality in that child's life. None of these tasks is easily undertaken by stressed-out contemporary parents. (p. 265)

The fathers in this study show us one parenting arrangement intended to provide this spirit of nourishing, growing and sharing that Hewlett refers to, while avoiding the stressed-out lifestyle so common in contemporary parenting.

Because SAHDs are still a rarity, the fathers in this study are politically significant, even if they do not realize it or want to be. Merely by living out their role as a full-time parent, these fathers are challenging the gender stereotypes that restrict both men and women into narrow roles; they are helping to blur the line between mothering and fathering. Studies have shown that when men are more involved in caring for children the

men in that culture are less misogynistic (Coltrane, 1996). Fathers choosing to be primary caregivers has implications beyond parenting to, in fact, change all of society, because parenting and gender inequality are directly linked.

So what is the point of this thesis? Is it merely an academic exercise or is there a good reason to look at the lives of SAHDs and to think about what discourages or encourages fathers from getting involved in parenting? Considering that parenting is an activity that intimately shapes and influences the lives, values, abilities, and interests of children and parents -- and therefore ultimately society -- I believe that it is an important area to better understand and improve. If this research improves parenting by causing one person to value parenting more highly and to value fathers' parenting more highly, then I feel that it is worth the effort.

The process of carrying out this research has caused *me* to value parenting more highly. I am even more passionately committed to equally sharing parenting with my husband now than I was before! As I sit at the computer writing this thesis the child does flip-flops in my womb reminding me that she or he is coming soon and my whole life will change. I want to make key decisions with my husband so that we can live out these changes with one of us or both of us at home raising this child for at least the first five years. Looking at our income, it appears that at-home parenting will take a miracle to survive on one income or two half-incomes, but after hearing these SAHDs' stories I believe that we can figure out a creative miracle to make it happen. Yet making personal changes does not feel like enough. I want to spread the word that there are fathers who are full-time dads and loving it! My impression is that people actually do not realize SAHDs



exist and that many of them are very satisfied with their role. How can fathers consider staying at home if it never crosses their minds as possibility?

I call upon every reader to spread the word that fathering full-time is viable option. I plan to write newspaper articles on the topic of SAHDS and enter this thesis in an academic contest focussing on family issues in order to publicize the topic. I call upon all fathers to consider parenting full-time. I call upon everyone to stop excluding fathers by assuming that the mother is the primary caregiver or the most involved parent. I call upon all adults to give little boys dolls and encourage their nurturing tendencies. I call upon mothers to stop acting like they know everything about parenting and to respect fathers' ways of parenting. I call upon all employers to be flexible and help parents balance family and work demands. I call upon all families to critique commercials and other messages telling them that they must buy more even though it means having to work more. I call upon everyone to realize the magnitude and importance of parenting and genuinely respect it.

## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A**

#### **Advertisements for Recruitment of Stay-at-Home Dads**

### **Are you a stay-at-home dad - or do you know someone who is?**

(Stay-at-home dad is defined here as a father in a long-term committed heterosexual relationship who spends, plans to spend, or has spent 30 or more hours per week as the sole caretaker of his children for at least 12 months)

#### **Does the stay-at-home dad live in Ontario?**

If you answered yes to these questions you are invited to join in a groundbreaking study of stay-at-home dads in Canada called *Stay-at-Home Fathers in Ontario: A Study of the Barriers and Incentives Facing Primary Caregiver Fathers*.

You can help Ontario better understand and support its stay-at-home dads by filling out a questionnaire and possibly participating in an interview.

For more information please contact the researcher, Nina Bailey-Dick as soon as possible (a Master's student at Wilfrid Laurier University) (519) 884-0710 x 2991 or [Baill1893@mech1.wlu.ca](mailto:Baill1893@mech1.wlu.ca)

The questionnaire can be sent to you via mail or e-mail.

#### **Newspaper Ad:**

Stay-at-home dads! Please call 519-884-0710 x2991 for info about joining an Ontario study.

## **Appendix B**

### **Study Information Letter**

#### **Wilfrid Laurier University, Study Information Letter**

**Stay-at-Home Fathers in Ontario: A Study of the Barriers and Incentives Facing Primary Caregiver Fathers** - Nina Bailey-Dick, researcher; Dr. Angela Febbraro, advisor

Dear Primary Caregiving Father,

You are invited to participate in the study *Stay-at-Home Fathers in Ontario: A Study of the Barriers and Incentives Facing Primary Caregiver Fathers*. As a Masters student of Community Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario I am using my thesis requirement as an opportunity to conduct a study of fathers in Ontario who are primary caregivers of their children. In all steps of this research I am supervised by my thesis advisor Dr. Angela Febbraro as well as my thesis committee members Dr. Geoff Nelson and Dr. Richard Walsh-Bowers. This research has also been reviewed by the university Research Ethics Board. The purpose of this study is to better understand the barriers and incentives stay-at-home fathers face when continuing or choosing the role of primary caregiver. The study focuses on the support or lack of support in these fathers' community contexts (such as attitudes of employers, parents, peers, and neighbours as well as community programs and governmental policies).

Information gathered through at least twenty questionnaires will be coded and analyzed in order to conduct three to five audio-taped interviews to gain a more in-depth understanding of the issues stay-at-home fathers face. The questionnaire (if you choose to participate) will take about one hour to complete. All the questionnaires and interviews will be completed by December 2001 and I will write a final report summarizing my findings – the thesis – by May 2002. At your request, I will send you an electronic copy of the questionnaire summary and/or the final thesis report.

Your participation in filling out the questionnaire will be kept **strictly confidential**. Your name will only be known by me, the researcher, if you offer it in willingness to participate in a later interview. Your name will not be filed with your questionnaire and if any quotes are taken from your questionnaire you will be assigned a pseudonym and any identifying characteristics will be removed. The raw data will only be seen by myself and my advisor, Dr. Febbraro and will be destroyed by June 1, 2002. The data from the questionnaire may be used again for future studies.

I want you to know that there are no apparent risks in this research, your participation in this study is voluntary and you may end your involvement at any time. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed. Withdrawing from the study will not have any impact on any benefit which you may receive from participating in the research. You have the right to omit the answers to any question, if you so choose. If you have any questions at any time about the study or the procedures you may contact Nina Bailey-Dick at (519) 884-0710 x2991 (address: Nina Bailey-Dick, Psychology Office, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75

University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5), Dr. Angela Febbraro at (519) 884-0710 x3989, or Dr. Bill Marr, Chair of the Research Ethics Board at (519) 884-0710 x2468.

My hope is that this study will raise awareness of the existence of stay-at-home fathers as well as help us understand why so few fathers make this choice. Ultimately, I hope this study will reveal the barriers keeping many fathers from becoming primary caregivers so that those barriers can be reduced and more fathers can stay at home with their children, if they so choose. I plan to use the information from this questionnaire to not only write the final thesis for my Masters degree but to raise awareness and understanding of fathers as primary caregivers by trying to publicize the results of the study in newspapers, magazines, and journals.

Please keep a copy of this Study Information Letter for your files.

Sincerely,  
Nina Bailey-Dick

## Appendix C

### Questionnaire

(\* at the beginning of an item indicates that it was excluded from the analysis and discussion)

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What town/city and province do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_
3. \*Does anyone besides your spouse and children live with you? Yes or No
4. \*If yes, who? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Please indicate your marital status (circle one of the following):  
single      married      divorced      co-habiting
6. What is the highest level of education you have completed? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What was your family's income for the tax year of 2000? (Please circle the appropriate category) [Under \$10,000]; [\$10,001-\$20,000]; [\$20,001-\$30,000]; [\$30,001-\$40,000]; [\$40,001-\$60,000]; [\$60,001-\$80,000]; [\$80,001-\$100,000]; [over \$100,001]
8. \*What was your family's income the year BEFORE you, the father, became the primary caregiver? (Please circle the appropriate category) [Under \$10,000]; [\$10,001-\$20,000]; [\$20,001-\$30,000]; [\$30,001-\$40,000]; [\$40,001-\$60,000]; [\$60,001-\$80,000]; [\$80,001-\$100,000]; [over \$100,001]
9. Do you work outside of the home? Yes or No
10. If yes, how many hours a week do you work? \_\_\_\_\_ hours
11. What is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
12. If you are not presently employed in the paid work force, what was your previous employment?  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Yes or No
14. Do you support women's efforts for equality? Yes or No
15. Do you believe that women have a "parenting instinct"? Yes or No
16. Do you believe that men have a "parenting instinct"? Yes or No
17. Does your spouse/partner work outside of the home? Yes or No
18. If yes, how many hours a week does she work? \_\_\_\_\_ hours
19. How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
20. How old are they? \_\_\_\_\_
21. \*Were you present at the birth of at least one of your children? Yes or No
22. \*Do they attend any type of child care/day care outside of the home? Yes or No
23. If yes, for how many hours a week? \_\_\_\_\_ hours
24. How long have you been or were you in this type of family arrangement with the father as the primary caregiver? \_\_\_\_\_
25. If you are presently the primary caregiver, how long do you plan to remain in this role? \_\_\_\_\_
26. What were the major reasons for choosing the father to be the primary caregiver?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
27. \*Who do you feel was more influential in the decision of this parenting arrangement?  
(please circle one) You or your spouse/partner

28. \*What do you see as being your role/responsibility as a father? (Of the following choices please circle the five roles/responsibilities most important to you)

Breadwinner  
Care for day-to-day needs  
General socialization  
Discipline  
Provide love and affection  
Play  
Head of the house  
Housework  
Provide stability/consistency  
Be patient/tolerant  
Encourage to achieve  
Assist with education  
Be there when needed  
Ensure are well mannered  
Look after health  
Ensure have morals/values  
Emotional stability  
Ensure do well at school  
Be a friend  
Give varied experiences  
Instil independence  
Ensure are secure in future  
Make sure are happy  
Influence personality

29. \*What do you see as being the MOTHER'S role/responsibility? (Of the following choices please circle the five roles/responsibilities most important for a mother)

Breadwinner  
Care for day-to-day needs  
General socialization  
Discipline  
Provide love and affection  
Play  
Head of the house  
Housework  
Provide stability/consistency  
Be patient/tolerant  
Encourage to achieve  
Assist with education  
Be there when needed  
Ensure are well mannered  
Look after health  
Ensure have morals/values  
Emotional stability  
Ensure do well at school  
Be a friend  
Give varied experiences  
Instil independence  
Ensure are secure in future  
Make sure are happy  
Influence personality

30. What do you feel have been the major advantages of choosing the family arrangement of the father as the primary caregiver?

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31. What do you feel have been the major disadvantages of choosing the family arrangement of the father as the primary caregiver?

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32. How have family relationships changed as a result of choosing this family arrangement? Please comment:

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33. How have other people reacted to your choice of family arrangement? (Please circle a number 1-5 next to each group of people)

(1) Very encouraging (2) Moderately encouraging (3) Neutral (4) Moderately discouraging (5) Very discouraging

Female peers	1	2	3	4	5
Male peers	1	2	3	4	5
Mother	1	2	3	4	5
Father	1	2	3	4	5
Female neighbours	1	2	3	4	5
Male neighbours	1	2	3	4	5
Female co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
Male co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
Employer	1	2	3	4	5

34. Please give examples of how people have POSITIVELY responded to your choice of this parenting arrangement:

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35. Please give examples of how people have NEGATIVELY responded to your choice of this parenting arrangement:

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36. Overall, what do you really enjoy about your current family arrangement?

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37. What are some of the things you really dislike about it?

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38. Why do you think that more families don't adopt a parenting arrangement with the father as the primary caregiver?

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39. What things do you feel need to be changed in society to encourage more fathers to choose the role of primary caregiver?

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40. Do you think that financial pressures or social pressures are more likely to deter fathers from choosing the role of primary caregiver? (please circle one)

Financial pressures or Social pressures

41. Please comment on why you answered as you did for the previous question:

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42. Do your family's financial needs encourage or discourage you in your role as primary caregiver? Please comment:

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43. If your family income dropped by \$5,000 would you still choose (or have chosen) to continue in the role of primary caregiver? Yes or No
44. If your family income dropped by \$10,000 would you still choose (or have chosen) to continue in the role of primary caregiver? Yes or No
45. If your family income dropped by \$15,000 would you still choose (or have chosen) to continue in the role of primary caregiver? Yes or No
46. Please indicate whether you (1) Strongly agree; (2) Agree; (3) Disagree; or (4) Strongly Disagree with the following statements by circling the appropriate number.

I feel that I am a person of				
worth, at least on an equal basis with others.	1	2	3	4
I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	1	2	3	4
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	1	2	3	4
I am able to do things as well as most other people.	1	2	3	4
I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	1	2	3	4
I take a positive attitude towards myself.	1	2	3	4
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	1	2	3	4
I wish I could have more respect for myself.	1	2	3	4
I certainly feel useless at times.	1	2	3	4
At times I think I am no good at all.	1	2	3	4

47. Do you think your parenting arrangement has any effect on the wider community? Yes or No
48. If yes, what kind of effect?

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49. Have you used the parental leave provided by the Canadian Government? Yes or No
50. If yes, how long of a leave did you take? \_\_\_\_\_ months
51. If yes, what percent of income did you receive? \_\_\_\_\_ %
52. Are/were you satisfied with Canada's parental leave policy? Yes or No
53. If not, what changes would you like to see in the policy?

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54. Do you participate in any community programs for parents, kids, and/or adults? Yes or No
55. What community programs aid or encourage you in your work at home?

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56. What community programs do you wish existed to aid and encourage you in your work at home?

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57. What or who are your primary sources of support in your work at home? (Please rank from 1- 7 with 1 being the most important source of support and 7 being the least important)

- ☐ Spouse
- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Neighbours
- ☐ Church community
- ☐ Spirituality/Faith
- ☐ Community programs

58. Please name another form of support which is important to you but is not on the previous list. -

\_\_\_\_\_

59. Was your baby breastfed? Yes or No

60. If yes, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_

61. What type of childcare arrangement did you have before you became the primary caregiver?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

62. Would you prefer some other kind of parenting arrangement? Yes or No

63. If yes, which one? \_\_\_\_\_

**Please help us understand the work environment of your most recent paid job.**

64. Do you feel that your career/work history influenced your decision to become the primary caregiver for your children/child? Yes or No

65. If yes, please comment on how your career/work situation influenced this decision:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

66. In your former place of work, were there any informal norms or sanctions that prevented individuals from using "family-friendly" programs, such as parental leave, that exist at your institution? Yes or No

67. If yes, please describe examples of these informal norms or sanctions:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

68. Did this prevent you, personally, from using such programs? Yes or No

69. Did your employer support men's active participation in child care and usage of government-provided family leave benefits? Yes or No

70. To what extent did male co-workers take advantage of government-mandated family leave benefits?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 71. To what extent have you taken advantage of such benefits?  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

72. Please circle the support programs provided by your employer/former employer:

- on-site child care
- flexible time schedules
- parental leave policies
- reduced work week
- time off for sick children
- seminars on parenting
- other \_\_\_\_\_

73. What was the typical reaction of male managers when a parent wanted to take parental leave? (please circle one of the following)

- very negative      negative      neutral      positive      very positive

74. What was the typical reaction of (male) co-workers when an individual wished to take parental leave? (please circle one of the following)

- very negative      negative      neutral      positive      very positive

75. Had any man in management taken parental leave? Yes or No

76. Had any manager reduced his work day or work week [a formal right in Sweden] to take care of children? (please check one of the following)

- \_\_\_ managers have taken both parental leave and reduced work time
- \_\_\_ managers have taken one or the other
- \_\_\_ no manager has taken either
- \_\_\_ I do not know

77. \*How much did you know about childcare and parenting before you became a parent? (please check one)

- \_\_\_ I was very experienced and well-read in the area of childcare.
- \_\_\_ I had a lot of experience with childcare.
- \_\_\_ I read a lot about child care.
- \_\_\_ I was somewhat experienced and well-read in the area of childcare.
- \_\_\_ I was somewhat experienced in the area of childcare.
- \_\_\_ I had little experience in childcare.
- \_\_\_ I had read little in the area of childcare.
- \_\_\_ I had no experience in childcare or in reading about childcare.

78. When you were 18 years old or younger did you ever want or plan to be a stay-at-home father? Yes or No

79. Who takes care of organizing the details of family life (appointments, children's nutritional intake, event-planning, gift-buying, clothing coordinating, vaccination updates). Please circle one of the following:  
 father      mother      both.

80. If your answer was "both", what percentage do you take care of and what percentage does your spouse/partner take care of? Father \_\_\_\_\_% Mother \_\_\_\_\_%

81. What percentage of household work do you do every week? (cleaning, cooking, maintenance, food preserving, food growing and shopping, ...) \_\_\_\_\_%

82. What percentage of household work does your spouse/partner do every week? \_\_\_\_\_%

83. Please describe how you and your spouse/partner decided to divide the household work

84. How long do you plan to continue in this parenting arrangement with you as the primary caregiver? (or how long were you the primary caregiver?) \_\_\_\_\_

85. Have you ever considered ending your role as primary caregiver? Yes or No

86. If yes, why \_\_\_\_\_

87. How do you think your parenting choice has influenced the people around you? (Your neighbours, parents, children, friends, acquaintances) \_\_\_\_\_

88. Have you ever been asked to speak or write about your role as a stay-at-home father? (Such as a newspaper article, an interview, a presentation to a group or class) If so, please tell me about it. \_\_\_\_\_

89. What could the Canadian government do to make it more possible for other fathers to choose to be the stay-at-home dads? \_\_\_\_\_

90. Were there ever "moments of realization" or an "epiphany" in your journey toward becoming a primary caregiving father? If so, would you please describe those realizations below (please take more space if you need it by writing on the back of the page): \_\_\_\_\_

91. Is there anything else you'd like share or something that you think the researcher should know? \_\_\_\_\_

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92. Is there anything missing from this questionnaire that you think should have been included?

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As another component of this study, would you consider participating in a one-hour interview? If so, please see the accompanying page titled: *Willing to be Interviewed?*

Would you like to receive a summary (via e-mail) of the results from this questionnaire?

Yes or No

Would you like to receive an e-mailed copy of the final report (warning: this may be over 100 pages)?

Yes or No

If yes to either of the previous two questions, please carefully print your e-mail address below:

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Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire.

Blessings on you and your family.

Nina Bailey-Dick, researcher

Please e-mail or send me your filled-out questionnaire **by November** (preferably sooner, if possible!). My e-mail address is [Bail1893@mach1.wlu.ca](mailto:Bail1893@mach1.wlu.ca), my phone number is 884-0710 x2991, and my address is Nina Bailey-Dick, Psychology Office, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5. Again, if you have any concerns or issues with this research please contact me or Dr. Bill Marr, Chair of the Research Ethics Board at (519) 884-0710 x2468.

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Guide**

(original)

#### **Questions on beliefs about parental role**

What do you see as being your role/responsibility as a father?

How do you see your role in relation to that of your wife/partner? Do you see them as being the same, or do you see them as being different? In what ways do they differ? (Probe on similarities/differences.)

Do you think that a father could care for children as well as a mother? Why?/Why not?

If yes, ask: Why do you think that so few men take on a caregiving role?

#### **Questions about shared-caregiving**

What were the major reasons for your parental arrangement?

What role does money play in your choice of this parenting arrangement?

Why do you think that more people don't adopt the family arrangement you have?

What things do you feel need to be changed in society if more people are to change roles?

Do you think your parenting arrangement has had any effect on the wider community?

If so, what kind of effect?

#### **Questions about community**

What community programs aid or encourage you in your work at home?

What community programs do you wish existed to aid and encourage you in your work at home?

What workplace changes would make it easier for fathers to choose to be primary caregivers?

What governmental changes would make it easier for fathers to choose to be primary caregivers?

How do you think that your parenting arrangement has influenced those around you?

What was your former employer's response (or present employer) to the news that you were going to be the primary caregiver for your children?

Tell me about your primary sources of support in your work at home?

Other questions to be determined by the responses given on the questionnaire.

### **Revised Interview Guide - January 3, 2002**

The following questions ask about how different parts of society influence your choices and feelings about parenting:

#### **Media**

How do you feel about your parenting role when you watch TV, read the paper, or listen to the radio? Does the media have any influence on how you feel about being a full-time parent? How are your choices and your priorities affirmed and supported or discouraged? (Is parenting valued?)

#### **Government**

How does the Canadian government encourage you or discourage you in your choice to parent full-time? Any differences between how men and women are encouraged/discouraged? (taxes, mat/pat leave, subsidizing community programs and/or housing and jobs)

### **Work/Career World**

When you think of the formal work world (your job, your wife's job, your field, your training, your colleagues, your employers) how do you feel that it influences your parenting choices and priorities? How does it discourage or encourage you in your parenting?

Do you feel successful in society's eyes?

### **Overall**

How do you feel society, on the whole, values or devalues parenting?

### **Questionnaire themes**

Many of the fathers who filled out a questionnaire said they would prefer to share the at-home parenting with their spouse rather than one having to be full-time work and the other full-time parenting. Do you agree or disagree and why?

(If they indicated this preference in their questionnaire ask: Why would you prefer half and half shared at-home parenting and income-earning? Why don't you do this? Why do so few parents share half and half?)

Why do you think that more fathers don't choose to be at home full-time with their children?

Image

Financial sacrifices

Self-esteem

Do you think it is more difficult for a father than a mother to parent full-time? Why?

### **Social Life**

How does your social life encourage or discourage you in your parenting role?

### **Community**

How does your community (church, library, different kids programs, local schools...) affect your feelings about being a full-time parent? (Affirming? Discouraging? Boosts self-esteem?)

## **Appendix E**

### **Interview Consent Form**

#### **Wilfrid Laurier University, Informed Consent Statement for Interviews**

**Stay-at-Home Fathers in Ontario: A Study of the Barriers and Incentives Facing Primary Caregiver Fathers** - Nina Bailey-Dick, researcher; Dr. Angela Febbraro, advisor

Dear Primary Caregiving Father,

You are invited to participate in the study *Stay-at-Home Fathers in Ontario: A Study of the Barriers and Incentives Facing Primary Caregiver Fathers*. As a Masters student of Community Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario I am using my thesis requirement as an opportunity to conduct a study of fathers in Ontario who are primary caregivers of their children. In all steps of this research I am supervised by my thesis advisor Dr. Angela Febbraro as well as my thesis committee members Dr. Geoff Nelson and Dr. Richard Walsh-Bowers. The university Research Ethics Board has reviewed and approved this research. The purpose of this study is to better understand the barriers and incentives stay-at-home fathers face when continuing or choosing the role of primary caregiver. The study focuses on the support or lack of support in these fathers' community contexts (such as attitudes of employers, parents, peers, and neighbours as well as community programs and governmental policies).

Information gathered through at least twenty questionnaires has been coded and analyzed in order to conduct three to five interviews to gain a more in-depth understanding of the issues stay-at-home fathers face. The interview (if you choose to participate) will take about one hour and will be audio-taped. The interview will be transcribed word for word and this transcript will be shown to you so that you can make any corrections before it is analyzed. All the questionnaires and interviews will be completed and gathered by December 2001 and I will write a final report summarizing my findings – the thesis – by May 2002. At your request, a short summary of the findings will be sent to you via mail or e-mail.

Your participation in an interview will be kept **strictly confidential**. Your name will only be known by me, the researcher. The audio-recording of the interview will be erased after it has been transcribed and you have given feedback. The transcript from your interview will be filed in a locked office until June 2002 when the transcript will be destroyed. If any quotes are taken from your interview, you will be assigned a pseudonym and any identifying characteristics will be removed.

My hope is that this study will raise awareness of the existence of stay-at-home fathers as well as help us understand why so few fathers make this choice. Ultimately, I hope this study will reveal the barriers keeping many fathers from becoming primary caregivers so that those barriers can be reduced and more fathers can stay at home with



their children, if they so choose. I plan to use the information from this questionnaire to not only write the final thesis for my Masters degree but to raise awareness and understanding of fathers as primary caregivers by trying to publicize the results of the study in newspapers, magazines, and journals.

I want you to know that there are no apparent risks in this research, your participation in this study is voluntary and you may end your involvement at any time. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed. Withdrawing from the study will not have any impact on any benefit which you may receive from participating in the research. You have the right to omit the answers to any question, if you so choose. If you have any questions at any time about the study or the procedures you may contact Nina Bailey-Dick, the researcher, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 884-0710 extension 2991, or Angela Febbraro, the advisor, at Wilfrid Laurier University, 884-0710 extension 3989. If you feel that you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in the research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Bill Marr, Chair of the Research Ethics Board at (519) 884-0710 x2468.

Please sign below if you have read and understand the above information.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix F**

### **Letter E-mailed to Interviewees**

Dear SAHD,

I want to tell you that the focus of this study is shifting a bit. The more I've read the questionnaires and thought about what these stay-at-home dads (SAHDs) are saying, the more I think the issue isn't so much specifically SAHDs as it is parenting and these fathers' priorities. These dads don't seem to be doing this because they have always wanted to be SAHDs or because they particularly love the role of a SAHD. Many seem to be doing it because they realize how important it is that their children have at least one parent caring for them (rather than a non-family member). So this means that I can't just focus narrowly on the barriers and encouragements to SAHDs since their issues are basically the same as anyone trying to prioritize family and the well-being of their children over getting rich or achieving success in the career world. I'm telling you all of this to let you know that I will be asking some questions about your perspective on the pressures you feel from the wider societal and structural forces (media, government, peer pressure, economic pressure) and how these pressures encourage you or discourage you (and your partner) in your choice to prioritize your children and your family. Does this all make sense? I'm just thinking this all through and definitely don't have everything figured out.

I look forward to talking with you,

Nina

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